Small Group Teaching in English Literature:
A Good Practice Guide

Jonathan Gibson

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The Higher Education Academy
English Subject Centre

Note and Acknowledgements

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Foreword

Student or tutor, professor or graduate assistant, trembling neophyte or confident third year: for most people engaged with English at university, 'small group teaching' is as critical to their discipline as the chance to study Shakespeare or the Victorian Novel. It means having the chance to exchange ideas in a forum small enough for everyone's voice to be heard. It means that, once heard, those voices can be nurtured. It means that students accept the responsibility to think for themselves while listening to what others have to say. Take away the 'small group' and the subject is de-natured.

You don't have to be at a university to agree. One of the reasons why English continues to be such a popular 'A' Level subject is that teenagers relish the chance to debate, to negotiate meaning rather than simply absorb it. In studying English, they become accustomed not simply to a body of knowledge but to a way of learning that is both individual and collective, personalised yet collaborative. Reading and thinking about books in the context of a 'small group' is an essential means of education, certainly, but also of socialisation. Older readers – for example, the many thousands of people who participate in book clubs and reading groups – feel the same special quality in the 'small group' discussion of a set text.

That doesn't mean to say that all voices even in the smallest group are always heard. Seminar discussion may, in ideal circumstances, take care of itself, but it is more likely to require careful planning and imagination. Tutors used to managing large numbers may well struggle to adapt to a situation in which they have to sustain discussion between only a dozen students, and we have all faced the situation where a group of undergraduates has little to say in the face of unfamiliar material. We are all experiencing the pressure to make every second of the student experience as valuable and enjoyable as it can be – and at a time when there will be fewer of those seconds to go round – so a guide such as Jonathan Gibson's, written with authority, sympathy and pragmatism, is especially useful and timely.

The greatest of our profession may not always be sure of their ground when it comes to dealing with small groups of students; or, when they are sure, not always models we might care to imitate. F.R. Leavis once famously observed that the essence of critical discussion lies in the implicit posing of the question, 'This is so, isn't it?' followed by the answer 'Yes, but'; as Bernard Bergonzi countered, Leavis perhaps gave insufficient weight to the possibility of someone replying 'I very much doubt it' or 'No, by thunder!' My own undergraduate tutor, a pupil of Leavis's, argued that no one wanted to speak in a Leavis seminar because they were all so eager to listen. I wonder. A rather different motivation for such silences is tendered, hilariously, by David Lodge:

> Occasionally one feels, as a teacher, rather like a soccer referee who, having blown his whistle for the kick-off, finds the players disconcertingly reluctant to make a move and is reduced to dribbling the ball himself furiously from end to end, scoring brilliant goals in undefended nets, while the motionless players look curiously on.

With Jonathan Gibson's new guide, more of us can look forward to sticking to our central task of ensuring the rules of play are observed and, very occasionally, blowing the whistle.

This foreword has been written in challenging times, and not only because the whole idea of 'small group teaching' has for some years been under threat. A matter of days ago, the Higher Education Academy announced that funding for its Subject Centres was to be discontinued. Let this new guide stand as an example of what the English Subject Centre has achieved in its ten-year life: the sharing of ideas with reference to the best available practice; the promotion of learning and professional development as a collaborative enterprise, free from the prejudice of private gain; the pursuit of excellence as a democratic imperative. I've been proud to serve on the Advisory Board for the Centre and record my appreciation of the work bequeathed to English scholars and students across the world by the Director, Professor Ben Knights, and his superb team. Now it's up to the rest of us to keep it going.

David Roberts
Birmingham City University

Introduction

Small-group teaching is the dominant pedagogic genre in English studies, on most modules in most departments taking up the lion's share of face-to-face interaction between lecturers and students. At their best, small group sessions (often referred to as 'seminars') allow group leaders and students to explore and develop their ideas together – they can be exciting, life-changing experiences. There are many pitfalls, however, and, despite the prevalence of the format, it is not safe to assume that lecturers, or indeed students, are naturally good at it.

Small group teaching has always been tricky, but the challenges are arguably greater now than ever before: larger group sizes and greater diversity in students' background and learning styles make it increasingly difficult to use a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Getting seminars right, meanwhile, is perhaps particularly important in English, as it is an academic discipline that tends to timetable relatively few contact hours. This can cause problems for first-year students who have been used at school to a different proportion of class-time to independent study. Every hour-long seminar in English (as is perhaps not so much the case in some science subjects) is therefore crucial. This state of affairs is not altogether a bad thing: it does provide today's lecturers with the need to think creatively about both seminar design and seminar management.

Nobody gets it right all the time: small group teaching is a constant learning process. This Guide's assumption, however, is that there are many things that you can do that will make it more likely that your seminars will go well. Its aim is both to give practical help to those new to leading small groups, and to suggest some fresh ideas to more experienced lecturers. It provides suggestions for activities you might like to use in your seminars (section 3), some ideas about ways of relating what happens in a seminar to what happens in the rest of a course (section 4), some tips on the detailed running of the seminar, including the suggestion that you set up 'ground rules' (2.4 and section 5) and some tips about evaluation (section 6). There are also some basic practical reminders (2.2). Seminar tips submitted by lecturers to the English Subject Centre database and student quotes from English Centre reports are provided as illustrations of key points. Whatever your experience and expertise, I hope that you will find something useful in the pages that follow.

1. Small group power

1.1. What is a small group?

In this Guide the terms 'small group teaching' and 'seminar teaching' are used to refer to teaching in which small groups of students (the range is usually 10 to 30 – see box) meet regularly under the guidance of a lecturer or postgraduate teaching assistant to discuss a particular topic. Often, students will have been expected to do some preparatory work prior to the session. The purpose of the session itself will usually be to develop students' abilities to formulate and debate arguments and/or to refine their critical understanding of a particular topic.

Typically, then, students in a small group will find out new information about the content of the module (from you, from their peers and from materials distributed in class); they will explore and develop their own ideas about the material in discussion; and in doing so, they will respond to 'feedback' (responses to their ideas) from their classmates and from their lecturer.

On many English programmes, seminars are closely linked to lectures: a one-hour session will often be timetabled immediately after a one-hour lecture on the same topic. (Sometimes, seminar leaders will have attended the lecture, sometimes not.) Some English modules are taught entirely in two-hour seminars, with no lectures: in these cases, a seminar will be likely to include lecture-like elements. Another possibility – dictated by rising student numbers – is to run a lecture-only module, in which long sessions with a large number of students incorporate many opportunities for student involvement and response. Very small group sessions, meanwhile – somewhat of an endangered species nowadays – can approximate more to the informal format of the tutorial. Between these two extremes, many different structures are possible.

Seminar group size

A 2009 survey of English departments produced the following findings:

Seminars with fewer than 15 participants were used 'regularly' by 72% of respondents and 'occasionally' by 23%.

Seminars with 16-30 participants were used 'regularly' by 65% of respondents and 'occasionally' by 23%.

Seminars with more than 30 participants were relatively uncommon, with 28% of respondents reporting that they were used occasionally and only 3% saying they were used regularly.

Source: Alexandra Cronberg and Jane Gawthrope, *Survey of the English Curriculum and Teaching in UK Higher Education* (Egham: English Subject Centre Report 19, 2010): **http://bit.ly/cTwLCm**

1.2 Why small groups?

What are the benefits of using small groups or seminars as a pedagogical method? Thinking about this question can help clarify your sense of what you are trying to achieve in your sessions. Here are some prompts towards an answer:

• Seminar discussion can expose students to a wide range of opinions, heightening their sense of the ambiguities and complexity of the the topic in hand. Many topics in our subject do not have an obvious 'right answer', and small group discussion can bring this fact home to students in a very vivid way.

• Seminars can help students become aware of their own assumptions and unpick them. Students can find that they can reframe their ideas by taking into account the ideas of others in the session.

• Seminars can help students develop the skill of thinking 'on their feet' as well as skills of argumentation, presentation and expression.

• Small groups can provide students with a 'safe space' for the expression and development of their own ideas, building up their confidence in their own ability.

• Seminars can help induct students into the values and world-view of the discipline.

If your small group sessions are to do these things, a certain number of prerequisites will be necessary: for example, the sessions will have to be constructed in such a way that as many students as possible feel able to speak and to express their ideas freely without feeling intimidated; and they will need to be designed in a way that builds productively on students' skills and knowledge.

Nine things you should know about small groups

1 The seminar is a difficult genre. Do not assume that students will automatically know how to participate, how to listen to each other, or even how to learn in a seminar.

2 Students may be uncertain about what counts as having anything to say about a particular subject – and worried about exposure in front of their peers (and you!). It is thus a good idea to, as a teacher, make your assumptions and practices explicit and visible.

3 All participants share responsibility for the success of the individual session or the programme as a whole.

4 However, the tutor / leader does have a particular responsibility to structure the seminar in such a way as to enable participation (see Section 3), maintain the group's working environment (see Section 5) and establish ground rules (see 2.4.) about preparation and participation.

5 Remember that generally speaking English students have relatively few contact hours, and almost invariably fewer than they will have experienced at school. The seminar is an opportunity to support / scaffold independent study, especially in the first year, by helping students plan their work, and giving models for independent study (see section 4)

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6 Seminar teaching, more than lecturing, has to be adaptive: you will have to adjust your approach to suit the individual characteristics of each different group.

7 A seminar is one of the places where students learn to become fluent in the discourse of the subject – and you as tutor have to be prepared to listen as well as talk. Arguably, the quality of your own listening will set a benchmark for the rest of the group.

8 Seminars operate simultaneously on intellectual, affective, and social levels, although the experienced group leader will not necessarily be conscious of all of these levels all the time.

9 Seminars are not simply about learning in a given subject discipline. They are also about learning to learn.

Source: Ben Knights, English Subject Centre.

2. Getting ready

2.1 Intelligent design

Preparing for small-group teaching should involve work both on subject content and on pedagogical approach. It is an easy mistake to spend far too much time on the former. Whilst embarrassing ignorance is obviously not desirable, over-preparing a seminar's subject-matter can make you disablingly keen to force the results of your preparation onto the students. Most lecturers would surely agree that seminars should not be tests of the seminar leader's knowledge: rather, they should be opportunities for all participants to learn through discussion.

So rather than trying to master every ramification of Milton's *Poems* of 1645, make sure instead that you have got to grips with some key topics. Use the rest of your preparation to think hard about the structure of the session (see section 3). What activities in what sequence would be most beneficial for these students in this group at this stage of this module?

Thinking through these and similar questions will help you come up with something akin to 'learning outcomes'. Most universities now require lecturers to compile learning outcomes for each module they teach – descriptions of the things they expect their students to be able to do as a result of having taken the module. The idea is that lecturers use learning outcomes as the starting point for designing a module's assessment and the shape of its teaching sessions. When planning your teaching, you might also like to use some of the prompts in this section: a list of 'desirable student attributes' (skills you might want your teaching to help develop in your students) and a checklist of planning questions. Reading these lists – and supplementing them with items of your own – will help clarify your sense of what the outcomes of your sessions ideally should be, and will start you thinking about ways of attaining them.

In general, do not be too over-ambitious in your aims for the session. Choose a couple of very important, basic things you would like the students to know about (or be able to do) by the end of the seminar. (You might or might not want to share these things with the students in advance, so they might not precisely overlap with the published learning outcomes of the module.) Using the prompts in this section, think about what your best strategy for getting these across might be.

Desirable attributes for students of English literature

These are some of the things that English lecturers may want to find in their students. But are they what students desire for themselves?

- Pleasure in language: at levels of both production and reading. A delight in irony, wit, pun, verbal facility, register shifting, code switching …

- Discursive flexibility: attention to style and register (oral or written) as appropriate to both subject matter and audience.

- Flexibility of mind: an ability to move between interpretations or conceptual possibilities.

- Athletic reading: an enthusiasm for diverse kinds of books (including LONG ones).

- Patience: tolerance of anxiety generated by ambiguity or uncertain meanings … and for there being no hard and fast rules.

- Going with patience for the exigencies of verbal craft: willingness to draft, edit, re-draft.

- Impatience for cliché, stale and hackneyed language.

- Ability to pick up a wide range of cultural and historical resonance (religious, mythological, historical).

- Risk taking: willingness to try new texts, new approaches … open-mindedness about possibilities.

- Interest in ideas. Could probably even say that they are expected to LIKE and use long or surprising words … when appropriate.

Source: Ben Knights, English Subject Centre.

2.2 Questions to ask when planning a seminar

Trying to find answers to questions like the following (you will think of others too) is a good way to sharpen up your seminar preparation.

- What do I want the students (and myself) to get from this seminar? And how can I achieve this?

- How can I present the material in a way that involves the students in finding out about it (rather than just hearing about it from me)?

- How will what happens in my seminars foster or support students' own independent learning?

- What implications do my texts or my subject area have for the way I need to them? What particular opportunities or challenges do they present?

- What problems are students likely to have with this material? What do I take for granted in my own thinking about this subject that students may not yet take for granted, or even be aware of? How can I help them acquire those 'threshold concepts'[1] which make sense of the discipline?

- If you are going to have to explain a complex topic in a seminar, what would be the best sequence in which to do it?

- Think about the different things you want to do in the seminar. Will part of the seminar involve the conveyance and/or testing of basic factual knowledge? If so, you might like to supplement the usual discussion-based format of a seminar with a quiz or reading session.

- How can I adapt what I want to do in the seminar to the resources at my disposal?

- How can I relate it to the rest of the module?

- How do I communicate that the topic matters? that this discussion is serious?

- How can I make sure that I am using a variety of teaching methods, so that students good at different things, and students with different cultural backgrounds, are equally catered for?

- What about the very first session? How do I begin? What can I do to help this collection of people become a working group? In later sessions, how can I best build on what this group did last week?

- How can I prompt this group to be one that privileges openness and discussion? What norms need to be put in place?

- What do I need to do to get as many students as possible to contribute?

You will have to find the answers to these questions yourself as you respond to the differing contexts and cultures of each group you teach. The aim of the rest of this Guide is to provide you with materials that will help you do just this. Only you will know which of these elements will be most useful for you as you go about your teaching.

2.3 Practical considerations
2.3.1 Materials
- Make sure all students have easy access to the set texts they need for the seminar: check that the right books are available in the library and/or the campus bookshop.[2]

- Make sure that materials you have created yourself are distributed in good time to the students and are as easy to use as possible.

- Make as much material as possible available in electronic form, online. This will allow students with different requirements to customise it as appropriate. But don't forget also to provide hard copies, as the use of computers may be problematic for other students.

- If you distribute photocopies to students, avoid using photocopies of photocopies ('second-generation photocopies') and try not to reduce the size of photocopied material too much (in order, for example, to fit everything onto a single sheet).

- If you use 'PowerPoint' in the seminar, make sure that you use a sans-serif font (such as Arial) at point 30 and that there is a sharp contrast between text and background (dark blue and cream make a good combination).

> ### Accessible texts
>
> Save electronic texts for student in 'rich text format' (ie. with an .rtf extension after the filename) rather than as Word (.doc) or PDF (.pdf) files: these other file-types include programming code invisible to the naked eye which can interfere with software that disabled students use to read the text.
>
> Use a sans-serif font such as Arial or Verdana in point 12, avoiding italicisation, underlining and capitalised text. Align text to the left and do not justify the lines. Make sure that the material you provide is clearly structured (using headings where necessary) and that its usefulness is obvious to the students. Use the 'headings' function in Word to create a clear structure for your document that users will be able to access by viewing the 'document map'.

- Consider providing guidance for students on your module using multimedia (e.g. videos, podcasts) as an alternative or supplement to the traditional course handbook.

2.3.2 The room
- Check out the room you have been allocated in advance of the session. There may be things about it that will make it difficult for you to run the seminar in the way you originally hoped: an awkward arrangement of chairs and tables, for example, or simply a very confined space. Don't schedule an elaborate, drama-based exercise without having first checked out the space.

- Find out about the availability of aids such as interactive whiteboards/smartboards, wi-fi access, data projectors, etc. The availability of some of this technology might give you an ideas for things to do in the seminar.

- Check that the position of chairs and tables allows everyone to see each other. Many lecturers like to run sessions with chairs arranged in a circle: this will, of course, not always be possible, particularly if other classes are booked in on either side of yours.

- Consider running some seminars in rooms equipped with computers. There are many ways in which lecturers in our subject can use electronic resources in a seminar (3.2.1), and for some disabled students, in particular, a computer suite can be an especially comfortable environment.

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1 Jan Meyer and Ray Land, *Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge: linkages to ways of thinking and practising within the disciplines.* ETL project occasional report 4 (2003): **www.tla.ed.ac.uk/etl/docs/ETLreport4.pdf**

2 Information about providing accessible copies of primary texts to students with visual impairments and other conditions that make the use of hard-copy books difficult can be found in Kevin Brunton and Jonathan Gibson, *Staying the Course: The Experiences of Disabled Students of English and Creative Writing* (Egham: English Subject Centre Report 18, 2009): **http://bit.ly/apT4Un**, section 4.4.2 (B).

• If you are teaching a very small group in your office, don't forget that you can turn to online resources to check or problematise your own or/and the students' arguments. An online computer can become a participant in the session in its own right.

2.3.3 Individual student requirements

Every small group contains a range of different types of students, with an array of varied skills, weaknesses, sensitivities, social/cultural backgrounds, ethnicities, learning styles, sexualities and personal preferences. Some of this variability will be immediately obvious (mobility problems, for example); others (like cognitive problems) less so. In dealing with the requirements of a particular student, it is always best to discuss things with the individual in front of you, rather than proceed on the basis of your own generalised sense of the requirements of a particular category of student (a generic 'blind student', for example)[3]. Here are some key things to bear in mind:

• Some disabled students will find it very difficult to make any contribution to a seminar, whilst others will wish to compensate for their anxiety about their written work by engaging fully in class discussion.

• Some disabled students will be happy for their disability to be public knowledge; others will not want other students in a seminar or lecture group to know about it (whilst nevertheless seeking support from a lecturer). Many such students want to maintain a low profile so that they will not be considered 'different' or 'special' by their peers. It is, of course, important to respect the student's intentions in such cases – though you will need to explain to them the potential problems that the lack of disclosure could cause.

• In some cases, it may be impossible for students to attend the session. In such cases, try to think of other ways in which your students might be able to achieve its aims: tutorials, perhaps (time permitting), or a worksheet with questions and readings relevant to the topic missed; video conferencing to allow students off-campus to participate; exercises in which students compile a record of the session that can be viewed later by the absentee (a live blog, perhaps, or retrospective seminar notes).

• Storage facilities in the department for bags, etc. will help some students move around more easily. Some students will benefit from an area where they can rest and/or take medication between teaching sessions.

• Room allocation can be a problem for some students, particularly if classes are often scheduled in rooms up steep staircases or many floors up.

• Some disabled students, while present at a seminar, may not be able to participate in the activities you have planned (discussion in subgroups, etc.). If these activities seem to you to be essential to the session, try to think of ways in which their outcomes could be achieved by the student in some other way. There are a wide range of helpful devices available, such as specially-modified keyboards. In some cases, it will help the student if you modify your teaching approach: try to find out from them what would be most useful. Sometimes very basic problems will arise, such as the problem of holding a book on a table. (Solutions are often lo-tech, involving assistive technology such as blu-tack® and drawing pins.) If you use writing exercises in a teaching session, make sure you allow enough time for a disabled student who has writing difficulties to finish – or make it clear to them before the session begins that you do not expect them to write as much as the others.

• If a disabled student wants to bring a helper into your seminar group, make sure that the other students understand the processes involved and how they can help. (Some students, however, will prefer privacy, and want their helper to sit in a different part of the room.)

• Some students (for example, those using lipreading or synthetic speech machines) will require prior notice of the topic and main ideas of the seminars: otherwise, they won't understand all the words that you are using. (It would also help if they knew in advance about specific passages of text analysed in detail.) The same will apply to students using personal assistants as note-takers or signers. Some students will require access to handouts prior to the session (ideally in electronic form) so that they can turn them into a form that they can understand.

2.3.4 Getting the timings right

• Try to work out how long each section of your seminar will last and jot down the approximate timings against a description of each activity (e.g. '10.20-10.40 (20 mins): Groups discuss extract sheet'). Do not be too doctrinaire in sticking to these timings – sometimes your estimates will turn out to be unrealistic; sometimes students will show particular enthusiasm for a topic.

• Do not delay starting the seminar too long. Wait for stragglers, but if more than five minutes after the official opening time have gone by, and some people have still not arrived, you really should get going. Do not let pleasantries about TV programmes the night before stop you getting onto the main sections of your seminar plan.

• Leave enough time at the end of the seminar to sum up key points and look forward to the next session. Just because students are still talking and seem engaged with the subject does not mean that they are keen to overrun the time slot.

2.4 Preparing together: ground rules

Try to remember that the success of a seminar is not exclusively up to you: it is the shared responsibility of everybody in the group. Spending some time at the start of the module establishing more or less formalised 'ground rules' to guide a group's behaviour during its time together is a good way of bringing this fact home both to the students and to yourself, and of pre-empting many potential problems.

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3 For more detail on disability, including a list of conditions, see Kevin Brunton and Jonathan Gibson, *Staying the Course: The Experiences of Disabled Students of English and Creative Writing* (Egham: English Subject Centre Report 18, 2009): **http://bit.ly/apT4Un**

Ground rules can be particularly valuable with first-years new to the format of the university seminar. They will also be particularly important in sessions that involve a degree of personal exposure (for example, in creative writing classes). Having ground rules in place will be useful not just as a recourse to appeal to if problems occur, but as a way of giving many less confident students a clearer sense of what small group sessions are for. The process of formulating them with the students, meanwhile, should help you focus your own thinking about what you see as acceptable or unacceptable behaviour.

If you do decide to establish ground rules, remember that they need to be discussed or negotiated with the group (perhaps in a special session), rather than simply presented by your fiat. One possibility is to start by asking students to write down individually a short list of good and bad things about seminars or classes they have been in before, and then to discuss these lists in pairs. In the full group, you can build on the conclusions of the pairs' discussions to brainstorm a series of rules which can be recorded and circulated.

Your list of ground rules is likely to include both practical matters (such as eating or using mobile phones in class) as well as guidance on discussion etiquette, (including the use of online discussion boards) (4.1.3)) and on the extent of your availability for personal consultation via email or in person.
It might include items similar to these:

- Disagreements will inevitably arise and they don't matter, but rudeness and personal comments are unacceptable.
- The seminar begins on time: we won't wait for latecomers.
- Everyone is expected to do their share of preparation and bring the required texts / copies to the class.
- If you can't attend, let the tutor know – in advance if possible.
- No-one in the group should speak for longer than three minutes at a time.
- Everyone bears some share of the responsibility for making this seminar a success. People who speak are not just addressing the seminar leader.
- At any point in the session, for whatever reason, anyone can call 'time out'. There will then be a five-minute pause for silent reflection/note-taking on the discussion so far.

Even if you feel that ground rules are not for you (devising them will often seem a bit excessive for very small groups), it is always worthwhile broaching some of these topics early on in the module, so that the students know what is expected of them and of you.

3. Types of small-group activity

Don't take it for granted that a group of students sitting round a table or spread around a room will know how to have a focused, informed discussion. Often they will fall back on you as seminar leader to run the discussion. (They may also expect you to do most of the talking.) Rather than falling in with such expectations

(and thus piling all the pressure for the success of the seminar on yourself) try thinking a bit more specifically and realistically about your role: you *are* responsible for setting up the structure of the session (giving it a beginning, a middle and an end) and keeping the discussion on track. It is therefore a good idea to give some thought to the session's overall shape.

To what extent ought you to use what might appear to be artificial ways of eliciting participation? Devices such as those described in this section are well worth considering, though clearly such structured activities should not appear arbitrary to the group. You will need to communicate to students why you are doing what you're doing, which means in turn being clear in your own mind about what you hope to achieve, so make sure first that you have thought through the topics discussed in sections 2.1 and 2.2 above.

Varying your teaching method – shifting, for example, between periods of individual reading/analysis (perhaps involving small-scale written tasks), periods of small-group activity and periods of plenary discussion and/or debate and performance – makes sense for many reasons. It will allow students to capitalise on their own individual skills and learning styles.[4] It is also more interesting for both you and the students.

Aim to strike a balance between conservatism and innovation. There is no point just mixing things up for the sake of it. On the other hand, you don't want all your students to groan when your old familiar strategy hoves into view for the nth time.

If you have built up a confident and well-prepared group, it may not be necessary later in the life of a group to engage in structuring activity. You may prefer to use more in the early weeks – though of course there might well be reasons (intellectual as well as social) for carrying on structuring groups later in the semester.

Planning will depend, of course, on the stage at which the particular group you are teaching is. Rigid structure, for example, might help a group focus on a key issue new and/or alien to them. Alternatively, several weeks' work on a module might mean that a group is ready for a mature, freewheeling discussion of where they have got to.

The suggestions for seminar activities that follow can be used both as the basis for whole sessions and as sections of sessions: feel free to mix and match![5]

3.1 Teaching the whole (plenary) group

Whether or not you will want to break your seminar group up into smaller groups will depend partly on the number of students you start with. On the whole, groups of six or less work well without being subdivided. If undivided, larger groups (particularly groups of 13 or more) run more dangers: of students developing simplified views of each other's personalities; of student/teacher roles hardening into caricature; of informal, possibly hostile, subgroups emerging; of, more generally, higher student anxiety. The more students there are in a group,

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4 Though the fully-developed theory of 'learning styles' (whereby particular people are classified as, say, 'kinaesthetic' or 'visual' learners) is controversial (see, for example, Frank Coffield, et al., *Learning styles and pedagogy in post-16 learning : A systematic and critical review* (2004): **http://bit.ly/7wS4Oj**).

5 You can find many more ideas in 'T3', the English Subject Centre's database of teaching tips, at **http://bit.ly/b10Jnz**, and, with more detailed information, in the 'Activity Ideas' contributed by Barbara Bleiman and Lucy Webster to the English Subject Centre website at **http://bit.ly/a2xKor**

however, the deeper the reservoir of talent and skills you can potentially draw upon. There should, then, be some real advantages in teaching the plenary group all together, at least some of the time. What are the best ways to go about it?

Big group dynamics

'Whereas in the small group it is easy to think but difficult to feel, in the large one the opposite is likely to be the case. It becomes difficult to mobilise the intellect, issues become polarised, splitting ('I all right/ you all wrong') takes over as a defence against anxiety about chaos, and, in order to manage this, people are likely to stereotype each other.'

Source: David Jaques and Gilly Salmon, *Learning in Groups: A Handbook for Face-to-Face and Online Environments* (London: Routledge, 2007). p. 10.

3.1.1 Brainstorming

Students call out ideas about a particular topic and you write them down on the board (or type them into a computer linked to a data projector). Strictly speaking, a brainstorm should involve four things: a stress on quantity of ideas (encourage students to call out whatever comes to mind), restraint in criticising the ideas, the welcoming of unusual ideas, and a secondary phase in which you and the students together work on sorting the ideas out, grouping those that are similar and so on. Brainstorming is an excellent way of thrashing out key points and issues that you can concentrate on in the rest of the seminar – either in plenary discussion or in small groups. It is also very effective at building a sense of common purpose in the group. Sometimes you will want brainstorming to follow and depend upon input of some kind from yourself – maybe a set text, or a way of dividing up a topic suggested by you.

SEMINAR TIP
Baudrillard's theory of the sign
George Selmer, Anglia Ruskin University

'Following a lecture on or a set reading of the relevant parts of Baudrillard's *Simulations*, provide the group with a handout detailing Baudrillard's four stages of the sign as a reminder. Divide the whiteboard into four columns – one for each of the proposed stages. Brainstorm examples and get the group to attempt to classify each example into the appropriate stage of the model. As they do this, and find that some examples sit less easily within one category than others, they should be able to begin to critique the model, by exposing its strengths and weaknesses through attempting to apply it. I find this a useful way of not only getting students to grapple with theory 'hands on', but also to encourage them to take issue with it where necessary.'

Adapted from an entry in 'T3 – Teaching Topics and Texts', English Subject Centre website (**http://bit.ly/b10Jnz**).

3.1.2 Rounds

Everybody in the group takes it in turn to give a short answer to a question or to express an opinion about something. This seems fairer to students than picking out one random student to answer a question, though with very big groups it can be cumbersome.

3.1.3 Public groups

You can also combine group discussion with plenary discussion by limiting the permission to speak to a certain group with the group, requiring everyone else to listen and watch. (For an example, see 3.2.2 , on 'Fishbowls'.)

For more on the dynamics of plenary discussion – and some of the problems – see section 5 below.

3.2 Teaching subgroups

The time-honoured words 'Now, let's split into groups' are the basis for many of the most useful ways of structuring seminars. Many students will feel more comfortable voicing their opinions in small subgroups than in the seminar group as a whole, and structured small group work can generate an energy, a sense of excited involvement, that sometimes leaks away in whole group discussion. Rapid-fire, apparently artificial activities often excite intellectual energy and start ideas and connections going. They force people to focus, and you and the students will, ideally, follow up these ideas and connections in more detail later.

You need to think about the composition of these groups. Will you employ 'home groups' which retain the same membership whenever small group activity is called for? Or re-allocate each time? Will you allocate membership on a random basis, or let students choose for themselves? (Caution: letting friendship groups work together often reduces the value of the work done. And it doesn't help members of the larger group to get to know one another.) Effort put in to organising the learning group at an early stage in its life will be amply re-paid later.

3.2.1 Types of material to give to subgroups

Such groups can all be asked to do exactly the same thing (such as analysing the same bit of text), or can be asked to do roughly equivalent things (such as analysing different bits of the same text), or can be allocated completely different tasks: each subgroup, for example, could be given a different topic to research in a different way. Usually you will want to follow this group activity with a plenary session picking up on it and taking it forward in some way.

There are many different types of material you can provide for your subgroups, of which the following are just a sample:

• Handouts containing a critical extract or a set of propositions encapsulating a particular aspect of the subject to hand. Groups could simply discuss the ideas among themselves, or you could ask different groups to prepare arguments for and against a particular point of view for presentation to the plenary group.

• A particular topic or text to discuss in relation to the set text.

• Puzzles: for example, 'unseen' poems with certain words missing.[6]

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6 Texts can be broken up electronically for analysis using 'Word' to form the basis for this sort of activity: see Barbara Bleiman and Lucy Webster's webpage on the English Subject Centre website, 'Activity Ideas: Number Crunching a Text with 'Word'', at **http://bit.ly/crTcM7**

> **SEMINAR TIP**
> ### The sort-a-sonnet game
> Rosie Miles, University of Wolverhampton
>
> 'Following on from a lecture on sonnets – their history and various forms, etc. – in seminars students are given a jumbled-up sonnet (Wendy Cope's 'Strugnell Sonnets' (in *Making Cocoa for Kingsley Amis*), which parody Shakespeare's, are good) and are invited to work in groups of two/three to reassemble the sonnet's lines in their correct order. To introduce an element of competition, offer a small prize for the group which gets there first!'
>
> Adapted from an entry in 'T3 – Teaching Topics and Texts', English Subject Centre website (**http://bit.ly/b10Jnz**).

- Source material for a literary text (many possibilities in Shakespeare, for example).

- Card sorts: give each group a set of cards each containing a different statement. Ask the groups to rank the statements in some particular order (importance, relevance to a particular topic, significance for a particular character in a novel, etc.).

- Ask each group to devise questions – perhaps even essay questions for their next assessment.

- Random quotations from the set text. Each group will then, in the plenary session, have to make a case for the significance of their particular quotations.

- An extract from the text under discussion (or from a related text – eg. something else by the same author) for close analysis.

- Give each student topics to research before the session that they can share in small groups, preferably with students who have researched different but related topics.

- If you are able to use a computer suite, or a room in which wi-fi access and laptops are available, students can be asked to look in pairs at material from an online text archive such as Early English Books Online (EEBO) or to search within an electronic copy of the set text to find the contexts of specific words and phrases. You can allocate particular words to different pairs and discuss the findings of each pair in a plenary discussion. Many online activities currently set as out-of-class student tasks can work very well within seminars as 10-20 minute tasks for pairs of students grouped around a computer.

- Ask groups to work on 'translating' some figurative language from the set text into more prosaic form.

- Paratexts (dedicatory letters, etc.) to think over in relation to the set text.

- Textually variant versions of the set texts or related texts (eg. extracts from the different versions of *The Prelude*): ask students to analyse the significance of the variation.

- A parallel set of passages from the set text to compare (soliloquies, descriptions of characters looking out of windows, extended metaphors, etc.)

- Ask the group to create a poster. This activity relies on having a flip chart or large sheets of paper available – and a good deal of floor or table space. Small groups make a poster of their main points and backing quotations. These are then pinned up for the groups to circulate and read.

3.2.2 Types of subgroup

- **Buzz groups** are small groups created momentarily for a specific purpose. If the discussion is flagging, you could, for example, ask the students to break into twos / threes to collect points on a particular topic (or to find three quotations that bear on the discussion). Or you could use buzz groups as a way to start things off (based on reading done prior to the seminar). Or you could stop the discussion and announce that there will be five / ten minutes for silent individual note-making, as a preface to a small-group 'buzz'. (If you do this, it will help to give some guidance – for example, tell the students to find a quotation which illustrates, or counters, the last point made.) Buzz groups are also useful as icebreaker activities at the beginning of a module – perhaps focused on a non-academic topic and/or something related to the students' own lives (for example, 'three things about me'). Mobile buzz groups are one variant: students mill about the room and must ask a question of each person they meet, not talking to anyone for more than thirty seconds.

- **Specified roles** and activities within the group. Each student in each group is assigned a specific role: examples might include 'facilitator', 'referee', 'scribe', 'devil's advocate' and 'summariser'. Alternatively, you could make rules about the order taken and the amount of time spent by each student in the discussion: for example, you could require that, in pairs, each partner must wait for a certain period (say three minutes) while their partner speaks before butting in.

- **Metamorphic groups**. Another possibility is to find ways for groups to change personnel in the middle of their discussion, opening up the conversation to more voices and/or giving a developmental structure to the seminar. For example, following a period of discussion in pairs, students can swap places with each other before continuing the discussion with new partners. In bigger groups, each subgroup member can be given a number (in each group starting with one) then, after a certain time, you can ask all the number ones to form a new group, all the twos to do the same, and so on.

- **Passing material** from group to group. A good way of developing students' understanding of a complex topic is for subgroups to pass material from group to group in a way that allows one group's ideas to be built upon and/or explored by others. Pairs of students might produce some material (perhaps listing examples of something) and then exchange it with parallel or related material produced by another pair. Each pair then comments on or analyse the first pair's list. If you have enough space in your classroom, you could ask larger groups to move around from table to table leaving material behind on each table in the process: one large sheet of paper on each table, for example, could be annotated by a sequence of groups. Alternatively, groups can send 'envoys' to find out about what other groups have been talking about.

- **Pyramids/Snowballs**. This type of subgroup is useful for topics which would benefit from development in a sequence

of different stages. Discussion occurs in groups that regularly double in size. In a typical example, each student will individually perform a written task. Students will then compare notes on the task in pairs. In fours, each pair will introduce each others' work. The findings of the group of four will then be built upon by a group of eight whose task is to develop more general principles. The group will then open out into a plenary session. There are lots of possibilities.

• **Fishbowls**. An inner group discusses something, watched by an outer group working at a 'meta' level – looking for patterns, themes, general soundness of argument, etcetera in the inner group's discussion. This approach generally works best if the outer group is given something specific to do. In one variation, the inner group contains an empty chair to which anybody from the outer group can come to make a statement or ask questions. Alternatively, you might set up a system of rules whereby people from the outer group regularly change places with people from the inner group. Fishbowls can be generated out of previous small group discussion: for example, representatives of each of a number of prior groups can together form an inner group to discuss their original groups' findings, watched from the outer circle by all the other members of the seminar.

3.2.3 Supervising subgroup discussion

Many lecturers like to go round the subgroups during their discussion to ask them about how they are getting on and to find out what ideas they are producing. One advantage of doing this is that it will give you some points to refer to when or if the groups recombine for a plenary discussion (see next section, below). It will also be an excellent opportunity to talk directly to quiet members of the group who may be too shy to speak during a plenary discussion. You could be tactical about it and target groups you think might be having particular problems – you don't *have* to visit all the groups.

How long should you allow for subgroup activity? Anything over twenty minutes or so will need to involve a task of some complexity. Generally you will be able to tell when the groups are ready to move on: the hubbub will have died down, most people will have stopped writing. You may have to change the structure of your session if the group-work ends up taking much less or much more time than you originally planned for – sometimes the session is all the better for the adjustment.

3.3 Returning to the whole group

Often – not necessarily always – you will want to return to plenary discussion after a small group activity. This can be a tricky moment to negotiate: the shift to the glare of the full group's attention can make students who have been merrily chattering away in their subgroups suddenly clam up. How can you best deal with this?

• Perhaps the most common approach is to go round all the groups asking each to report on its findings. The pressure is then on you to make links between the various different reports back. You will be helped in this process if you listened in on some of the subgroups' discussions, as you will have more student-made opinions to draw on. You could ask the

groups in advance to choose a spokesperson and scribe (and even provide them with big bits of paper), so that they have something written down to report back to plenary group.

• An alternative approach is simply to ask if anybody has anything in particular that struck them during the small-group discussion. Sometimes it is a good idea to ask a more specific question such as 'What were the main disagreements in your group?' or to ask a topic-specific question that shifts the debate to a more complex level.

• You could follow small group discussion with a brainstorming session (see 3.1.1) on the same topic, perhaps providing some categories of your own to which students can relate the findings of their subgroup.

• If you have asked the subgroups specifically to prepare something to present in the plenary (arguments in a debate, for example), the transition should be smoother. (It is surprising, though, how often small groups drift away from very specific instructions and end up having intellectually valuable conversations that are strictly speaking 'off-task'. Try to be sensitive to this possibility.)

3.4 Writing exercises[7]

Interrupting the oral mode of a seminar and asking the students to do some writing can work wonders, providing a change in pace and refocusing minds on the details of a topic. It can also be a powerful way to help students get to grips with essay-writing skills.

• 'Free writing'. Call 'time out' from the seminar and ask everyone to spend five minutes writing down their reflections on what has just been discussed. You could allow 'free diagramming' as an alternative: everyone draws a map/diagram of the discussion so far.

• Give students an extract from the text under discussion and ask them to rewrite it in some way (from the point of view of somebody else, say, or in non-figurative language).

• If the group agrees on a particular point about a topic or text, ask everyone to write down their own version of this point/argument. Everyone then compares what they have written down with a partner.

• Students write down lists of reasons/examples to support a particular argument. Each then passes her or his list to a neighbour who makes the list into a passage of continuous text.

• Everybody reads a passage from a text and writes an immediate one-paragraph personal response to it, using the word 'I' as freely as possible. Each student then swaps with a partner and tries to elaborate her or his partner's paragraph into the sort of point about the text they might want to make in an essay.

• Give the students a short extract from a piece of critical writing and ask them to write a one-paragraph response to it.

• Ask students to write down three questions they have arising out of the seminar discussion so far.

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7 For more on this method of teaching, see the excellent 'Thinking Writing': A guide to writing-intensive teaching and learning' website produced by Sally Mitchell at Queen Mary, University of London: **www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk/**

• Students are given a passage of a literary work to read and asked to write their personal response to it. They are then given an extract from a piece of critical writing on the same passage. In pairs, they compare what they have written with what the critic has written.

> **SEMINAR TIP**
> *Beowulf* (trans. Seamus Heaney)
> Helen Smith, University of York
>
> 'Students can be asked to research Old English formal conventions and their use in *Beowulf* prior to the seminar. Alternatively, you can briefly run through certain key features: alliteration, four stresses, kennings, etc. They should then be asked to see which of these features Heaney (or another translator) has preserved. Again, it may be helpful to provide examples from a handful of other translators as points of comparison. Students can then be asked to collaborate in small groups to produce their own mini-epic, whether based on an episode from *Beowulf* or on their student experiences, preserving or using as many OE formal features as they can, and being prepared to describe and justify their choices to the seminar group.'
>
> Adapted from an entry in 'T3 – Teaching Topics and Texts', English Subject Centre website (**http://bit.ly/b10Jnz**).

3.5 Performative techniques

Drama workshop techniques are obviously useful for teaching plays: there are many ways of getting to grips with dramatic texts by using with students the sort of techniques actors use in rehearsal (marking punctuation in a speech by particular movements, physicalising the status relationships in a scene, shortening scenes, reallocating lines, transforming text into mime, and so on). But it is equally possible to use these methods when teaching other texts or topics, recasting literary or conceptual elements in dramatic terms. Groups can, for example, be asked to form visual tableaux or improvise short scenes summing up particular aspects of a topic or text. Many topics in English Language could be taught using exercises in gesture and movement to explain and analyse specific linguistic features.[8]

Drama workshop techniques are commonly used at pre-HE stages of education to clarify students' knowledge of the events of a play or teach them very basic facts about a topic. To fulfil the more analytical objectives of an HE seminar, it will often be necessary to supplement such exercises with more conventional discussion/reflection.

If you plan to make extensive and elaborate use of drama workshop techniques, make sure that you are aware of any health and safety ramifications in your institution. You will also, of course, need to consider the suitability of the teaching space you have been allocated. Your institution may have a drama studio that you could book for special sessions.

One place to start is James Stredder's *The North Face of Shakespeare: Activities for Teaching the Plays* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), an invaluable anthology of drama workshop techniques applicable to many topics other than Shakespeare.

• **Role play**. One option is for one student to take the part of an author, critic or theorist, and, in character, answer questions from other students. There are many other possibilities: for example, students could also role-play the original readers/ audience of a literary text, using materials researched and provided either by you or by them.[9] Or they could stage an impossible confrontation between, say, a modern critic and a nineteenth-century author.

> **SEMINAR TIP**
> *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Jean Rhys)
> Eoin Flannery, Oxford Brookes University
>
> 'In groups of three, students are required to prepare, over a number of weeks, questions and answers for an imaginary interview with Jean Rhys. One student plays the author, whilst the other two are interviewers. The interviews are performed in class, perhaps for peer review, encouraging interaction with the larger group. Following the interviews, students are required to write up the script of their interview and to submit a preparatory log.'
>
> Adapted from an entry in 'T3 – Teaching Topics and Texts', English Subject Centre website (**http://bit.ly/b10Jnz**).

• **Debates** are better established than most other drama techniques as a method of teaching English and can be a good way of opening up the complexities of a topic to students (one option is to ask students to argue for an opinion contrary to the one they hold). For debates to work, students will have to have been given time, in teams, to prepare their arguments in detail, perhaps before the seminar.[10] They can be helped by specially-produced handouts. You could ask other seminar groups or members of staff to sit in on the session as a jury.

> **SEMINAR TIP**
> *Mansfield Park* (Jane Austen)
> Britta Martens, University of the West of England
>
> 'Give students a few quotations from critics that take different views on whether Fanny is a positive heroine or an anti-hero. Let students take sides in small- or whole-group discussions and argue their case with reference to the text.'
>
> Adapted from an entry in 'T3 – Teaching Topics and Texts', English Subject Centre website (**http://bit.ly/b10Jnz**).

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8 The CAPITAL centre at the University of Warwick, now part of the Institute for Advanced Teaching and Learning (IATL), worked extensively in this area: see their website at **www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/capital/**.

9 For a detailed example, applied to the *Lyrical Ballads*, see Barbara Bleiman and Lucy Webster's webpage on the Subject Centre site, 'Activity Ideas: Contemporary Readers – A Contextual Role Play', at **http://bit.ly/9rQvWK**

10 For a detailed example of how a debate might work in practice, see Stella Bolaki's English Subject Centre case study 'Turning the Classroom into a Debate Hall: Arguing about Racism in *Heart of Darkness*', at **http://bit.ly/cm4UQX**

• **Reading aloud** is a simple activity that can be very effective in literature seminars at helping students to a fuller experience of texts. But it can also have a similar effect in other non-literary types of seminar. Some lecturers routinely begin their seminars by asking a student (different each week) to read aloud the passage of text on which the seminar will focus. Asking students to memorize poems for reading aloud, or (perhaps in pairs) to prepare poems for performance to the plenary group, can also be highly effective: having to decide on a particular approach to each line will make them aware of a range of previously unsuspected interpretative possibilities. A 'choral' reading by the whole class together can, like these other activities, be followed by a very valuable comparison of impressions/feelings/ideas about the poem stimulated by the act of performance.

3.6 Maps and diagrams

Some students find it easier to conceptualize things in visual/diagrammatic form than in written form or in oral discussion. While the activities described in this section should be particularly valuable for them, shifting the discussion into a visually-based mode will be a refreshing change for many other seminar participants, and should help generate fresh ideas.

• Create a continuum line (either a real one on paper or card, or an imaginary one going from one end of the room to the other) along which students can range themselves according to their opinion on a particular topic. (One end of the line will represent one extreme of opinion about something; the other will represent the other extreme.) You can also propose that each of the four corners of the room represent a particular opinion. These groupings of student opinion will provide you with the starting point for many different types of activities and discussion.[11]

• In groups, students make pictures/maps or diagrams arranging elements of a topic or text in a visually striking form. There are many ways of organising this: for example, one student in a pair might begin a drawing that must then be completed by the other student in the pair. [12]

SEMINAR TIP
The Remains of the Day (Kazuo Ishiguro)
Susan Love, University of Nottingham

'Depending on the time available, either set up the activity the week before and ask the students to produce their charts at home, or, give them the opportunity to do it in the class. Some novels can be mapped using lines drawn from left to right across a sheet. These lines can be useful for indicating the pace, flow and pauses of a narrative and its handling of time. For *The Remains of the Day*, this method can show how each day of Stevens' journey is a geographical move into new territory, and also a movement in the way in which the narrator is constructing the past. Supply student groups with flipchart sheets and encourage them to be 'bloody, bold, and resolute!' (thick pens help the timid). Give students a chance to talk through their results with the group and share their discoveries about the text. Often 'failed' attempts are as useful as ones that are perceived to be successful because students learn that the novel may not work quite in the way in which they had originally visualised it.'

Adapted from an entry in 'T3 – Teaching Topics and Texts', English Subject Centre website (**http://bit.ly/b10Jnz**).

• Make cards with a variety of concepts written on each relating to the topic in hand. Students arrange them on a table to depict their view of the interrelationship of the items on the cards (characters, parts of an argument, quotations from a text and so on). In the plenary session, groups explain their thinking to the rest of the students.

• In a variant of the previous activity, ask students instead to arrange visual representations of concepts relevant to the seminar topic (pictures cut out of magazines, for example).

• In groups, students design a board game (or a similarly complex artefact) based on the text or topic under discussion.

• Use mind mapping software (such as 'MindManager') in a small group session using computers: in pairs students can compile electronic mind maps relevant to the seminar topic.

• Other computer-based sessions can use visual materials: for example, group work assembling wikis or blogs.

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11 For much more detail on the use of continuum lines, see Barbara Bleiman and Lucy Webster's English Subject Centre webpage 'Activity Ideas: A continuum line – Exploring and Comparing Texts, Genres, Interpretations', at **http://bit.ly/bWhTv0**

12 For more on pedagogical uses of drawing, see Pauline Ridley and Angela Rogers, *Drawing to Learn: Arts and Humanities* (University of Brighton, 2010): **http://bit.ly/aN0tl8M**

3.7 Other senses

Think about aspects of your topic that students could learn about using their senses. You could, for example, bring objects mentioned in a literary text into the seminar to use physical reality as a way of interrogating literary description. Alternatively, run the seminar outside the institution, in a setting relevant to the setting of the text/topic under discussion.

SEMINAR TIP
Small Island (Andrea Levy)
Alison Waller, Bath Spa University

'Students should work in pairs and begin by trying to define the exact colour of each other's skin. They should then identify moments in the novel where skin colour is discussed (Chapter 33 is a good example). What connotations are there in the terms 'white', 'black', 'fair', 'ruddy', 'honeyed', 'drab', and so on? Are the descriptions always technically precise? Remind students that these descriptions come from the multiple narrators in the novel.'

Adapted from an entry in 'T3 – Teaching Topics and Texts', English Subject Centre website (**http://bit.ly/b10Jnz**).

3.8 Student contributions

The students' discovery of their own take on a topic should, of course, be at the heart of any small-group session, so it makes sense to devise at least some activities, such as those listed below, that are primarily dependent on student input.

- **Presentations**. For the past few decades, in-seminar student presentations have been a mainstay of assessment and teaching at HE level. Detailed support and guidance from you will make it more likely that their presentations stimulate further discussion in the session. If you have enough time, you could ask students to practise their presentations in subgroups. You could also ask students not doing a presentation to fill in specially compiled evaluation sheets. Alternatively, you could set up a session in which non-presenting students are given specific roles (such as responder, referee, timekeeper, etc.).[13]

- **Student-run support groups.** (PAL (peer-assisted learning) groups, or study groups). Another way to help students make sense of their course is to set up (or simply encourage the setting up of) student-led groups between staff-led seminars. There are various possible models, including groups led by students who have done the module in a previous year and student-only groups following up tasks set by the lecturer in the lecturer-led seminars.

STUDENT OPINION
Contact hours

'Asked how they would improve the experience of students of English, the students all asked for more contact hours, though not only with staff: in Chris's words, "I do miss seminar groups and just hearing other people's opinions."'

Source: Student quoted in John Hodgson, *The Experience of Studying English in UK Higher Education* (Egham: English Subject Centre report 22, 2010) : **http://bit.ly/dvZ926**

- **Peer teaching**. Teaching somebody how to do something is one of the best ways of learning it oneself, so asking students who have mastered a particular topic to teach it to other students will benefit both the 'teachers' and the 'pupils'.

- **Group-work outside class** in teams (for example, 'problem-based learning' (PBL) or 'inquiry-based learning' (IBL)). In true 'problem-based learning', a student group works together on a 'problem' given to them by a tutor, producing a collaborative piece of work (perhaps in electronic form: say, a wiki or blog). The hope is that through solving the problem the students develop both expertise in the course topic and the ability to use their academic skills in 'real' life. The allocation of different roles to different members of a team of this sort can help unlock individual skills – and also counter the loneliness felt by some students, including some of those with disabilities. Assessment can combine individual with team scores, and can involve journals. Miniature versions of true 'PBL' can be slotted into more conventional modules and combine with lecture and seminar sessions on relevant topics.

- **Agenda setting** when starting on a new text or topic. Let the group know you will be doing this the week before. Informal buzz groups agree a shortlist of areas they think the class should consider. You then collect these ideas onto the whiteboard / flipchart. (You can of course slip in your own ideas as well.) The group prioritises the topics and discusses the order in which to approach them. These could then either be pursued in the whole group, or in subgroups each focusing on a different topic under the aegis of a specific task.

- **Using prior knowledge**. At the beginning of a module, do some seminar work based on student knowledge of the topic in hand (and therefore also assumptions and prejudices): a quiz, for example, or a short writing exercise (3.4).

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13 For a detailed case study including sample guidance material and student evaluation forms, see Arran Stibbe's English Subject Centre case study 'Emergence: A Person-Centred Approach to Oral Rhetoric', at **http://bit.ly/dpzv51**

4. The space between: what students can do before and after small group sessions

4.1 Complementing the session

The time spent between the sessions is just as important as the contact time itself – in fact, arguably, it is more important, given the stress English places on independent student work. So giving students a sense of how their time should be spent is a must, particularly for first year students. Simply asking students to read the set text and think about it will not always be enough to generate a good group discussion. More specific instructions will generally be a good idea, and are worth planning with as much care as the group activities themselves.

4.1.1 Detailed instructions about work between sessions

- Make sure you have explained the requirements of the module as clearly as possible – making clear in reading-lists (sent out early) and/or other course material which books (or parts of books) are compulsory reading and which are optional. Providing long lists of books and articles without any indication of how and why students might engage with the material will cause unnecessary anxiety.

- Ask students to read the set text with particular topics in mind: you could ask everyone, say, to come to the seminar with two questions they would like to ask about the reading.

- Students can be asked to write short pastiches of the set text in advance of the seminar. The experience of creative rewriting will provide valuable material for discussion.[14]

- Many other types of short writing exercise (see section 3.4, above) can be set as inter-seminar tasks: short pieces of creative writing related in some way to the set text; paraphrases of a topic or book in a set number of words; book or article reviews. These pieces of writing could be gathered together in a portfolio to form part of the module assessment.

- Work with electronic text archives such as Early English Books Online (EEBO – cf. above, 3.2.1).

- Ask students to track a particular metaphor/set of imagery through a text, as they read, bringing three examples to the seminar for discussion.

- Set students a quiz in your VLE (virtual learning environment) on the topic of the seminar. It is possible to set quizzes that test student knowledge and skills at a very high level.[15]
For other uses of VLEs between seminars, see 4.1.3, below.

4.1.2 Guiding note-taking between sessions

Note-taking is a vital skill for English students but one very rarely explicitly addressed by tutors. Creative ways of doing this include:

- Asking students to keep a reading log in which to record their immediate reactions to their reading, either in a structured way related to the themes of the course or as completely free 'response statements'. The log could form part of the assessment, or be entirely optional. It could also take a number of different forms: a physical logbook, a 'Word' file, a blog, a video or audio diary.

- Setting small-scale assessment tasks linked to out-of-class reading.

- Asking students to post reports on their reading on an online discussion forum (cf. 4.1.3, below). Again, this could be structured or free, and perhaps form part of the assessment. Students could be asked to post after reading a certain number of lines or chapters, and/or post answers to specific questions, on particular topics, or in the personae of characters from the book.[16]

- On a first-year course, holding a special note-taking seminar, in which all participants discuss different ways of reading and annotating a particular passage.

- Encouraging or requiring students to form out-of-class support groups linked to particular classes (see 3.8, above).

- Working in class with one of the many study skills books on the market, and/or with online resources designed to support note-taking. One possibility might be to discuss recommendations made by these sites in a special session – or even try out different methods with students and critique the results, linking the activity to specific themes/structures in set texts –developing study skills and curriculum knowledge simultaneously.

- Help students with their time-management skills: encourage them to break down large tasks into smaller elements, and to take advantage of calendar software.

4.1.3 VLE-based activities between sessions

STUDENT OPINION
Online discussion between seminars

'It can sometimes be disheartening on a module when you study a different strand/text every week but ultimately only write on two or three of them. It can be easy when you are busy to neglect the ones you don't intend to write on… The VLE discussion activities defeated this problem. I am personally very glad that I could engage with all the texts on the course via the VLE.'

Source: University of Wolverhampton student quoted in Rosie Miles et al., *Online Discussion in English Studies: A Good Practice Guide to Design, Moderation and Assessment* (Egham: English Subject Centre report 21, 2010):
www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/reports.php

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14 Guidance in using this approach can be found in two major works on English pedagogy: Rob Pope's *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies* (Routledge, 1994) and *Active Reading: Transformative Writing in Literary Studies* (Continuum, 2007) by Ben Knights and Chris Thurgar-Dawson.

15 See, for example, the sample quizzes posted by Matthew Sauvage on the HumBox website: eg. **http://humbox.ac.uk/375/**

16 For a worked example of what can be done, see Rosie Miles's English Subject Centre case study, 'Text.Play.Space : Creative Online Activities in English Studies', at **http://bit.ly/b1kKHR**

The use of VLE (virtual learning environment) discussion boards between sessions can be a powerful adjunct to work in the classroom. More details are available in the Subject Centre's recent Good Practice Guide to online discussion.[17] There are many benefits: it can help build a bridge between academic work and the rest of a student's life, students can explore topics discussed in a seminar in more detail and quieter students might find it easier to make contributions. Not least, you will gain an enhanced insight into your students' enthusiasms and ideas.

• You can set up online discussions to run as preparation for a seminar: students can compare notes on the set reading, work together on particular questions and collaborate on material that can then be brought into the session. Any pre-seminar preparation task (reading logs, small-scale writing tasks, etcetera) can be channelled through the discussion board.

• Alternatively, online discussions can be timetabled to follow sessions, enabling students to open out the topics discussed in class. Or, of course, they can form a bridge between two sessions, focusing on a topic shared between the subject-matter of two successive seminars.

• The discussion could focus on a topic related to but distinct from those covered in class: students could be asked, for example, to find contemporary examples of a topic discussed in relation to a pre-modern text.

• Online discussions can take place either in the whole seminar group or within subgroups ('workgroups'), much like class-based discussion.

• The discussion can either be 'asynchronous' (whereby students can read and reply to posts across a wide time period) or in 'real time'. Guests from other institutions can also be brought into the discussion.

• Online discussions can link in to other online work, such as the use of text archives or databases. Students can be asked to track down particular categories of text, for example, and discuss their relevance to the topic in hand.

• A creative, role-playing element can be an exciting part of online discussion: you could, for example, ask students to post to the discussion in the person of characters from the book (see 4.1.2 and the Subject Centre's Good Practice Guide to online discussion[17], 1.4.6.)

• It is possible for discussion group postings to form part of an assessment: for more details see the Subject Centre's Good Practice Guide to online discussion, section 3.

Whatever use you make of online discussion, don't forget that it is important to set up clear ground rules (cf. 2.4, above) for it, and that your own role is crucial: while you shouldn't be constantly looking over the students' shoulders, you shouldn't simply opt out of the discussion either.

4.2 Links with assessment tasks

Exam-based courses often timetable some seminars specifically as revision sessions. There are ways of addressing coursework assessment directly in your seminars too, which will help students both before and after the hand-in date(s).

• Run a session discussing the course handbook's guidelines on essay-writing and/or the official assessment criteria (for a sample session structure, see the box below). The discussion could be complemented by sample essays (either genuine student essays from past years, used with permission, or specially-composed models). The discussion need not be abstract – it could be integrated into discussion of a particular author/text.

SEMINAR TIP
An assessment criteria workshop
Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe), Oxford Brookes University

1. Working in small groups, students discuss the individual marking of sample assignments and agree a group grade and rationale.

2. Small groups feed back to the plenary group their agreed grades and rationale.

3. Tutor compares small-group rationales with the assessment criteria, and explains each criterion.

4. Small groups review their assessments and grades in light of the tutor's explanation.

5. Final report from small groups to plenary of their agreed grade for each sample assignment.

6. Tutor provides annotated and marked versions of sample assignments, and discusses tutor assessment and mark.

More detail at **www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/resources.html**

• Ask students to unpick and analyse the arguments of a critical essay – perhaps even one of your own publications. More generally, explaining to students how you yourself come to make particular arguments about texts (and to articulate those arguments using particular rhetorical strategies) should help them in their own written work.

• Provide students with a framework, or 'writing frame' (in the form of headings and/or the beginning of sentences). As part of an exercise on a particular topic, this could be done in such a way as to stimulate thought in all students rather than forcing the adoption of a simplistic essay structure.

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17 Rosie Miles et al., *Online Discussion in English Studies: A Good Practice Guide to Design, Moderation and Assessment* (Egham: English Subject Centre report 21, 2010): **www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/reports.php**

- Allow students to submit essay-plans and/or drafts. There are many different ways of doing this: on a one-to-one basis; as in-class peer assessment; in lieu of detailed feedback on the final essay; as part of a portfolio. One possibility is to redesign the assessment structure of a module to include a two-stage assessment, the first part involving notes/preparatory materials such as an essay plan and a second part consisting of a formal essay.

- Run a peer feedback session in one of your seminar slots. You could ask each student's assessment to be reviewed jointly by two peers.[18]

- Encourage students who might benefit (not just dyslexic students) to use graphical organising (or 'mind-mapping') software to think through their ideas and plan their work visually. Programmes such as 'Inspiration' and 'Mind Manager' allow students to view information both as visual images and in written form, enabling 'Word' documents to be reformatted diagrammatically. The production of these diagrams can be discussed within the seminar in a peer feedback session.

- After you have marked an assessment, devote some time in the next seminar to an overall discussion of the students' work, highlighting both good and problematic elements in order to help students develop and improve their work.

- VLE-based discussion (as described in the section above) can form part of the assessment of a module: see section 3 of the English Subject Centre's Good practice Guide to online discussion.[17]

5. Keeping it going

Managing a seminar group has been compared to the process of teaching a small child to ride a bicycle: it is a tricky combination of knowing when to offer support and guidance, and when to remove your steadying hand.

Dangers and temptations are many and various, and you will develop your own methods of pre-empting and dealing with the most common. Some of the tips and ideas below might help.

5.1 Starting things off, drawing things to a close

- Try to learn the students' names. This will always help the dynamic of your seminar, particularly with first-year students, many of whom will have had a much closer relationship with their A Level teachers than they will with their lecturers. At the beginning of a module, if there are not too many, ask everyone to introduce themselves individually. (Make sure you introduce yourself as well.) You could ask group members to wear badges, and/or identify themselves when first contributing to the discussion. Finding out about what other courses students are doing, and what their interests are will be useful later on in the module, as you find yourself wanting to draw on individual students' expertise.

- Establish clear lines of communication. Tell the students in the first session when you will be available for consultation, email etcetera and take contact details from the students.

Making clear the level of your availability early on will stop you from being constantly emailed and texted day and night.

- Be clear about what the purpose of the session is. At the beginning of the module try to make sure that students are clear about its aims, and, when you are explaining things, be careful to give them sufficient time to ask questions. Talk them through the module guide and the assessment régime. Find out the answers to questions promptly if you don't know them immediately.

- Begin the seminar with a short summary of what you are planning to do in it (and also talk, if it feels necessary, about the relationship of the session to earlier seminars in the course and/or about upcoming assessments and later sessions). You do not need to be so detailed as to remove any elements of surprise: a bare minimum of information will be sufficient to prevent students from feeling uncertain and disorientated.

- Consider starting the module by drawing up ground rules with the students (see 2.4 above).

- Summarise key points at the end of the seminar, making sure that you give sufficient weight to the students' own contributions to the session. You could write up some of these key points on the board.

- Leave enough time at the end to deal with any questions, loose ends, practical matters, etcetera and to look forward briefly to the next session: you can set work for it and/or explain how it will build on what you have just discussed.

5.2 Enabling and guiding whole group (plenary) discussions

5.2.1 Asking the right questions.

When asking questions in a seminar, or making points that you are hoping students will build on in further discussion, try to make sure that you are pitching the question at an appropriate level of detail. Very general, open questions are, paradoxically, particularly hard for students to answer

In general, it is better to start with small tasks, specific questions or specific quotations rather than some gambit such as 'what do you think?'. (Though the latter could work well if you have a small and cohesive group with a clear sense of previous weeks' discussions as a context for the question.)

> **STUDENT OPINION**
> **Question etiquette**
>
> 'Verbal questions can cause problems if they aren't specific and don't have an obvious purpose (ie. if they're woolly or rambling), or if they are asked aggressively'
>
> Source: Student quoted in Kevin Brunton and Jonathan Gibson, *Staying the Course: The Experiences of Disabled Students of English and Creative Writing* (Egham: English Subject Centre Report 18, 2009): **http://bit.ly/apT4Un**

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18 For detailed guidance on running peer feedback sessions, see the resources available on the Assessment Standards Knowledge exchange (ASKe) website at Oxford Brookes University: **www.brookes.ac.uk/aske/resources.html**

5.2.2 Responding sensitively to student contributions

• Avoid the temptation to say 'Good, but…' too early on. In other words, try not always to use a convenient comment by a student as a spring-pad for your pet theory. See if you can arrive at the 'but' through a question instead, keeping the student 'on board'.

• Keep an open mind and don't jump to conclusions about what a student has just said. (It is easy to caricature student contributions unfairly.)

• Repeating or rephrasing student comments will help other participants follow the progress of the discussion more easily.

• There are many possible ways of responding to a student comment: repeating, asking for clarification/expansion, opening it up to the group, linking to other parts of the discussion, probing and analysing, summarising. It is often a good approach to try looking behind the comment itself at the assumptions it embodies.

• Ideally, you should reward students who have worked hard and are well prepared, without alienating poorly-prepared students – a difficult balance to strike.

• Write up valuable student-generated questions or points on the board and use them as the basis for future groupwork.

• Try not just to look at the speaker when a student is speaking: check to see what else is happening around the room.

• Try not to be too harsh on a student's first contribution to a seminar discussion.

• When praising a student comment, try to be specific about what is good about it.

> **STUDENT OPINION**
> **Supportive seminars**
>
> 'I was really, really nervous about having crazy ideas about texts, said Holly, 'but once you get into a seminar situation you…bounce ideas off other people your own age… And not being rejected helps to build confidence as well'.
>
> Source: Student quoted in John Hodgson, *The Experience of Studying English in UK Higher Education* (Egham: English Subject Centre report 22, 2010) : **http://bit.ly/dvZ926**

• Try to distinguish between what you think is plain 'wrong' and what is simply a matter of opinion.

• If you feel you have been providing the students with too much information in reply to their comments, try limiting yourself to asking questions of them. You should not box yourself into the corner of being the final authority on everything.

5.2.3 Responding to silences sensitively

One problem all seminar-leaders will have encountered is a silent response to a question they have just asked (see box).

> **The misuse of silence**
>
> 'A teacher thinks the students are ready for the discussion and throws out a provocative question. A long period of silence ensues, punctuated by much embarrassed shifting of bodies and aversion of eyes. The teacher, thinking the question was perhaps too opaque, rephrases it in a more direct way. Another period of silence descends on the room. Feeling that things are slipping out of control, the teacher counts silently to ten and then proceeds to answer the question himself. The teacher then presents a second question for discussion and follows this quickly with a lucid response or perhaps a short lecture. The teacher becomes increasingly frustrated by the lack of participation and interprets students' unwillingness to say anything as personal hostility or contempt for the class. Teacher and students are then sucked into a vortex of misunderstanding and mutual recrimination. Both are angry at the other for creating a situation that causes great discomfort.'
>
> Source: Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for University Teachers* (Open University, 1999), p. 141.

Resist the urge to say something straightaway to fill the gap. Instead, try waiting a little for what has just been said to percolate through the group. Maybe one of the students just needs a little more time to formulate their comment. Some lecturers recommend waiting 10 seconds, some 20. If the silence persists, try clarifying the question you have just asked and/or break it down into more easily assimilable parts. If there is still no response, it is probably time to shift to a different activity: you could ask the students all to jot down individual notes about the question you have just asked, and/or discuss it in buzz groups (3.2.2), before opening things out into a full discussion again. Or you could move into a more elaborate seminar structure, such as those described in section 3, above. (A shift to subgroups, for example, will give students who are feeling uncertain more confidence in expressing themselves.)

• Prepare backup material in case you work through everything too quickly: spare extracts to analyse, and so forth.

• Say at the beginning of the module that silence is not a problem. Point out that there will inevitably be silences, as everyone gathers their thoughts, and that at such moments no-one should feel under pressure to say something just for the sake of it. Paradoxically, being up-front about this can make it easier for some, quieter students to contribute to the discussion.[19]

5.2.4 Linking the discussion together

• As the seminar proceeds, take every opportunity to point out useful links with other parts of the same discussion and other parts of the module.

• Take time to recap on the discussion so that everyone understands what has been happening. At the half-way point in the session, consider whether or not a brief summary of the main points made so far is necessary. (You may well want to make notes to keep track.)

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19 For more on this idea see Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for University Teachers* (Open University, 1999).

- In a free-flowing seminar, in which frequent student contributions change the course of the discussion, record the main ideas as they develop on a board (or ask a student to). Revisit the board at the end of the seminar.

STUDENT OPINION
Concentration

'A lot of the time I'm struggling through fatigue (especially after the first hour), I can't concentrate. I lose whatever I'm talking about, I can't remember what has just been read out.'

Source: Student with Mobility problems and unseen disability, quoted in Kevin Brunton and Jonathan Gibson, *Staying the Course: The Experiences of Disabled Students of English and Creative Writing* (Egham: English Subject Centre Report 18, 2009): **http://bit.ly/apT4Un**

5.2.5 Keeping the discussion flexible

Often the best seminars are those where the turn that a discussion has taken has surprised the lecturer. Ideally, then, you should try to create a structure which will be welcoming to off-kilter ideas and fresh approaches.

- Remember that it will always be preferable for students (rather than you) to put the argument together in a seminar.

- Try to make a distinction between your own opinion and your marshalling of the discussion.

5.2.6 Not letting things slide

Group-work sometimes brings with it the temptation to 'go with the flow', to connive in conversation that everyone in the group finds enjoyable and easy, but which is not best calculated to advance the education of the group. For example: try to avoid the session degenerating into either 'fight' (united hostility to a scapegoat such as a lecturer or critic with whom everyone disagrees) or 'flight' (pleasurable deferment of the task at hand: gossip, anecdotes about technology, and so on). It's easy to collaborate with 'fight' or 'flight' for the sake of a quiet life. Sometimes a seminar seems to be working well as a social event, but with insufficient learning taking place. This is another point where a change of medium (asking everyone to write something, for example, or splitting into groups) could be useful.

5.2.7 Dominant students

A talkative student (or more than one) is only a problem if the other students feel blocked out. (Clearly, you should not overact and screen out students just because they are articulate.) You can either deal with this problem within the structure of the seminar – by designing activities that require students to take on roles in turn (listener, speaker, scribe, and so on) or moving into a highly structured format involving student writing (as discussed in section 3, in particular 3.4). More simply, you can, of course, try to get other people to speak by asking them directly, making it very clear how much you value their contribution.

If the problem persists and you find yourself having to talk to the student, try first to get them on side by talking about their interests in the courses they are doing, their plans for the dissertation and so on. Try to get them to help you in drawing other students out, rather than focusing on their excessive talking.

Ground rules (2.4) could go some way to pre-empt this problem:

a rule, for example, stipulating that after speaking any student has to wait for three other students to speak before contributing again.

5.2.8 Quiet students

Quiet students may not be having problems. They may, however, be slow at processing information. Give opportunity for written contributions to the session, either written beforehand (for example, free writing (see 3.4, above) or in the session itself.

Shy students can be helped by pre-session preparation tasks as they will have been able to concentrate on them outside the pressure-cooker (as they might experience it) atmosphere of a small group session. Many will find VLE-based discussion between sessions (4.1.3) very beneficial. They will also be helped by pauses/time-outs and division into subgroups. Division by role (3.2.2) will help them, as will problem-based learning approaches (3.8). Ground rules (2.4) on the acceptability of silence and awkwardness will help too.

5.2.9 Difficult questions

Be honest about questions the answer to which you don't know. Avoid casting the seminar as an occasion in which your responsibility is to provide answers. You can direct the course of the discussion to see if the students can answer a difficult question, or you can promise to look up the answer for next time.

6. So how did it go? Evaluating the effectiveness of your small group teaching

6.1 Self- and peer-observation

- In the immediate wake of a seminar, whether 'successful' or 'unsuccessful', you will not always feel in the mood for sober self-analysis. But this is the very best time to give some thought to what went right and what went wrong. If at all possible, jot down some brief thoughts about this while the session is fresh in your mind. It might help to set aside a particular notebook or computer file for doing this.

- If you are clear about the objectives a seminar is designed to achieve, one perfectly sensible approach to evaluation is to ask 'Were the objectives achieved?' It can, though, be difficult to assess this unequivocally, so it may be more fruitful to assess the conduct of the seminar.

- It is always worthwhile to pay particular attention to the first session of a module. Are there any clues in what happened that suggest possible hints for how to teach the course later and pre-empt subsequent problems?

- Many academic units will have their own schemes for peer observation, and these will generally provide their own observation checklists. Even where such schemes are not in operation, it can be enormously beneficial to invite your mentor or another colleague to sit in on one of your classes and give you some feedback. Alternatively, you could use the list in the box below as a way of focusing your own reflection, ideally immediately after a seminar. Recording such reflections over a term or year can help you to identify successful strategies and build confidence.

Checklist for Peer or Self-Review

1. How did the session start?

2. Off the top of your head, how would you characterise the emotional climate of this group? (Try a hot … cold spectrum if stuck.)

3. How would you characterise its intellectual tone?

4. What did you find most surprising about this session?

5. How many people spoke during the session you observed?

6. What do you notice about the typical patterns of interaction in this group? For example, is it dominated by a few individuals? Is there a sub-group of students who appear to be at sea or have withdrawn from the action?

7. Do you notice anything particular about the non-verbal interactions?

8. Who initiates changes of direction? Are these always initiated by the lecturer / tutor?

9. What did you notice about the pace of the seminar? What were the most energetic moments? And what its most listless?

10. If the lecturer / tutor talks a lot, why do you think this is?

11. How does a topic emerge? Who is responsible for its emergence? Does the tutor plan ahead with the group?

12. How does the class scaffold or prepare the way for individual study?

13. How did the tutor handle difficulties, for example, interruption by latecomers? Irrelevant observations? Students without copies of the text, or who hadn't done the preparation? Reluctance to carry out a specified task? Silent students? Over-bearing or dominant students?

14. How effective were the pre or post seminar activities on the VLE in terms of participation, interaction etc?

Source: Ben Knights, English Subject Centre

6.2 Evaluation by students

There are many different ways you can find out about students' opinions of your seminar teaching, ranging from informal dialogue to the formal end-of-module questionnaire. Techniques which might be classified as 'informal' include the following:

• Pausing to ask if a point needs to be covered again (avoid the 'Is everyone with me?' type of question which tends to provoke automatic nods of agreement).

• Asking how helpful an exercise or discussion has been – you might ask students to vote on a scale of 1-5 in order to avoid the 'yes' factor.

• Asking everyone to write down the one thing in the module they would change if they were able to.

• Asking how an exercise might be changed to make it more interesting or useful.

• Asking if an accumulation of exercises or discussion has helped to progress understanding.

• Student blogs and diaries (perhaps part of the assessment of the module).

• In-seminar polls using an electronic voting system.[20]

• Asking students at the end of a module to write an imaginary letter to a future student on the module describing their experiences.

You can ask questions in the seminar itself, and/or on the module pages on the VLE.

The formal end-of-module student satisfaction survey can be a useful formative tool *if* it asks the right questions and is analysed formatively rather than summatively. Telling students what has been changed as a result of their feedback, meanwhile, encourages them to provide good quality feedback in the future.

You might find it useful to supplement the official end-of-module survey with mid-module questionnaires of your own. (Some lecturers give students a very skeletal questionnaire to fill in after *every* session in a module.[21]) Gathering student opinion about matters such as problems with the room, the speed of the course and so on *before* the module finishes is one of the best way of improving students' experience.

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20 For example 'Turning Point'. See 'Enabling Interactive Learning in the Classroom with Turning Point', an English Subject Centre case study by Nuria Yáñez-Bohza at **http://bit.ly/9ESUXq**

21 For an example, see the detailed description of a regular 'critical incident questionnaire' in Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for University Teachers* (Open University, 1999).

Bibliography

English Subject Centre resources

More detail on many of the topics broached in this Guide can be found on the English Subject Centre website (**www.english.heacademy.ac.uk**). See in particular:

Seminar Teaching (**http://bit.ly/2ZRp9N**). The gateway to the website's seminar-related material.

Rosie Miles et al., *Online Discussion in English Studies: A Good Practice Guide to Design, Moderation and Assessment* (Egham: English Subject Centre report 21, 2010): **www.english. heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/reports.php**

Information about providing accessible copies of primary texts to students with visual impairments and other conditions that make the use of hard-copy books difficult can be found in Kevin Brunton and Jonathan Gibson, *Staying the Course: The Experiences of Disabled Students of English and Creative Writing* (Egham: English Subject Centre Report 18, 2009): **http://bit.ly/apT4Un**, section 4.4.2 (B).

T3 – Teaching Topics and Texts (**http://bit.ly/b10Jnz**). An online database of concise seminar-teaching ideas, classified by topic, text and pedagogic approach.

Case Studies (**http://bit.ly/aPW7db**) More detailed descriptions of innovative teaching, contributed, like T3 entries, by lecturers.

Seminar Teaching – Activity Ideas (**http://bit.ly/a2xKor**). A rich collection of detailed teaching ideas contributed by Barbara Bleiman and Lucy Webster of the English and Media Centre.

The Subject Centre website also includes material on the teaching of particular curriculum areas (such as, for example, Victorian literature: see **http://bit.ly/cGLBC8**) and on other teaching topics, such as assessment (**http://bit.ly/9DliwO**).

The English Subject Centre commissions and edits a series of books on the teaching of specific areas of the curriculum, *Teaching the New English*, published by Palgrave. For details see **http://bit.ly/cAsN9s**

Other websites

Drawing to Learn: Arts and Humanities (**http://bit.ly/aNOHBM**). A downloadable pamphlet by Pauline Ridley and Angela Rogers uses for drawing in HE humanities teaching. Part of a broader project on 'visual learning' based at the University of Brighton: **www.brighton.ac.uk/visuallearning/**

HumBox (**www.humbox.ac.uk/**). Humanities teaching resources (handouts, online quizzes, etc.) submitted by lecturers and freely available for reuse.

Openlearn (**http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/**). Free access to Open University course materials.

Teaching as a Ph.D. student (**http://issuu.com/ historysubjectcentre/docs/teachingasaphd**). Although written primarily for History PhD. students, this pamphlet by Kate Bradley, available both online and in hard copy from the HEA History Subject Centre, is full of friendly and practical advice useful for any beginning Humanities lecturer or tutor.

Teaching at Nottingham (**www.nottingham.ac.uk/pesl/**). A superb collection of podcasts, videos and written reports in which lecturers at the University of Nottingham reflect upon their teaching practices.

Thinking Writing: A Guide to Writing-Intensive Teaching and Learning (**www.thinkingwriting.qmul.ac.uk/uk**). Stimulating resources on writing exercises and HE pedagogy across all disciplines.

Using Discussion in the Classroom (**www.schreyerinstitute.psu. edu/tools/Discuss/**). A page of resources and weblinks from the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence at Penn State University. This is a good starting-point from which to explore the wealth of online US-based resources on the topic of 'discussion teaching'.

Books

For further suggestions, see the 'Teaching Library' page of the English Subject Centre website, at **http://bit.ly/9PePet**

Much very useful curriculum-specific material is available in the MLA's *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* series (**www.mla.org/store/CID39**).

Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for University Teachers* (Open University, 1999). Stimulating, thoughtful and practical.

Sally Brown and Phil Race, *500 Tips on Group Learning* (Routledge, 2000). Focuses more on group dynamics than on session design.

Ellie Chambers and Marshall Gregory, *Teaching and Learning English Literature* (Sage, 2006). Includes detailed material on seminar teaching.

Kate Exley and Reg Dennick, *Small Group Teaching: Tutorials, Seminars, and Beyond* (Routledge, 2004).

Sue Habeshaw, Trevor Habeshaw and Graham Gibbs, *53 Interesting Things to Do in your Seminars and Tutorials* (Bristol: TES, 1992). Does what it says on the tin.

David Jaques and Gilly Salmon, *Learning in Groups: A Handbook for Face-to-Face and Online Environments* (London: Routledge, 2007). A stimulating grab-bag both of theories about group work and of ideas for managing groups.

Ben Knights and Chris Thurgar-Dawson, *Active Reading: Transformative Writing in Literary Studies* (Continuum, 2007). Like Pope's book (below), a key text on the use of creative writing in literature teaching.

Rob Pope, T*extual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literature Students.* (Routledge, 1994). Combines theory and teaching ideas with references to relevant pedagogic research

Elaine Showalter, *Teaching Literature* (Blackwell, 2002). Experiences of many lecturers collated by a major critic.

James Stredder, T*he North Face of Shakespeare: Activities for Teaching the Plays* (Cambridge University Press, 2009). Hundreds of ideas for drama workshop teaching, applicable far beyond Shakespeare.