

TERTIARY LEVEL

**THE USE OF THE SEMINAR METHOD AT POST-GRADUATE
LEVEL***

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"Without the spirit of scholarship, teaching
degenerates into routine."
Dexter Perkins, Chairman
American Historical Association, 1956.

My brief does not allow me to enter into a discussion of the seminar method as such. This is fortunate because since its original inception in the early 19th century the genuine German *historische seminar* has branched into so many variations that it would need a special presentation to cover all possible shades and samples of the seminar. I have been asked to focus very specifically on "practical problems and opportunities for the study of contemporary European history." But before I can do that, I have to be more explicit on what I understand by the term seminar. To do this, I must take a slightly broader view of different variations of the seminar method of teaching and training.

1. PURPOSE AND MEANING

The details of the origin of what became popularly known as the *Deutsche Historische Methode* are generally known. It was the German school that established history as an independent scholarly discipline with a scholarly (scientific) methodology. It was Barthold Niebuhr and Leopold von Ranke, and their predecessors in the field of Greek and Roman philology, August Böckh and Friedrich August Wolf, who first developed the so-called philological method of interpretation of sources. The methodological principles, which Niebuhr for the first time applied consistently to the field of Roman history and Ranke to the field of Modern European history, have become the common property of the discipline of history. But we all know that hectic debate and constant refinement have developed the methods of history far beyond Ranke's more rigid and narrow approach. In many aspects of history the classic principles of philological criticism have only a secondary significance. In their

day, however, these principles constituted a veritable revolution.

A second important thing to remember is that, through the policy of Wilhelm von Humboldt, the Prussian Minister of Education, the German universities were moulded according to the belief that they have to function simultaneously as research and educational institutions. The idea of the unity of research and teaching not only gradually found its realization in all German universities, but in some degree conquered the world. That is why the quote from the President of the American Historical Association supplies the epigraph for this presentation.

The third element that forms an essential background to this presentation is the fact that the seminar was regarded as the real fulfilment of the idea of the unity of research and teaching. The seminar, not the lecture, was regarded as the true expression of the new scholarly attitude.¹ The seminar was not unique to History. It was originally developed in ancient philology and came into general use in all philosophical and even in the theological faculties. It was a unique form of instruction, intended to assist researchers in the development of their research. It was intended primarily for scholars, not for students. Presenting the preliminary results of research to a free community of interested teachers and students who were also engaged in, quite often, related research, the seminar was intended as a discussion forum where sources, interpretations, and methods and strategies of research could be discussed in detail. It only gradually became an institutionalised form of instruction. The first historical seminar that could be regarded as a

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structured part of the professional training of historians was established in Königsberg in 1832. Ranke's famous seminars were less formalised. They were voluntary, personalised and regular disputations held in his home with his own students. But they became the model for later generations of academic historians: an opportunity to be trained as a historian committed to a rigorous discipline of archival research. The heuristic ideal of finding and establishing the original sources in their purest form, and analysing them in a minutely detailed and thoroughly exhaustive way to establish "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist", was the hallmark of real scholarship.

Having said this, one must remember that the seminar has since lost its original purpose as a purely scholarly institution for discussion of basic research. It is therefore important to stress the fifth element in the general survey of the purpose and meaning of the seminar: it now serves primarily pedagogical purposes, though its discussions still motivate scholarly efforts more than do factual lectures.² The German university system recognises this in the way that it distinguishes between different kinds of seminars. The two most important are the **vorseminar** for undergraduates and the research seminar for doctoral students. Others are **Proseminare**, **Mittelseminare** and **Oberseminare**. It is interesting to note that it is still fairly common amongst German universities, especially the older ones, to refer not to the History Department but to the **Historische Seminar** and to structure courses around the number of seminars that you have to attend at undergraduate level and present at doctoral level.³ Students of history in a German university will most probably find themselves in a position quite alien to American students. There is seldom a definite programme of study telling him exactly what he should study and how to plan his university years. Much is left to his own initiative. Seminars are organised under the guidance of a professor. Every term a great variety is offered, each devoted to a special theme which is often of a rather narrow and restricted nature, making it possible to present a really in-depth and detailed study rather than a broader understanding of the causal link and relationship between events. Active participation by students and scholars, rather than presentations by the professor, forms the basis of the seminar method. Extensive reading, severe questioning and harsh criticism from the professor and fellow students set a very high standard. Students are provided with a reading list, sometimes with specific topics for preparing papers. Often they have to develop their own particular topics within the announced theme of the seminar series. Finding and reading an impressive list of books sets a very demanding study programme. Seminars usually meet once a week and even when students are not presenting a paper, they are expected to actively enter into the discussion and to question the

work being presented. If they fail to do that, they will not be allowed to proceed to the next stage of seminars. While attendance at lectures is not compulsory, seminars are. Seminars are small group presentations, normally not more than 10-12 people which makes control of standards, participation and attendance that much easier.

2. DEFINING TERMINOLOGY

Having stressed the evolution of the seminar method from its original purely research-oriented basis to a more pedagogical purpose, we need to look at the inflation of terminology. Is there a difference between the seminar, the tutorial, the discussion group, the workshop and a colloquium? To this must be added the so-called case study popularised in Business Schools since the early 1950s and the conference course designed for periodic in-service training of personnel. These terms are no longer bound to any strict definition. They are often freely used to describe more or less the same thing. For the purposes of this presentation the following distinctions between these different terms will be used:

- Small group activities are an extension of the lecture where the emphasis is on discussion and feed-back on aspects of the work covered in the lecture. This type of more personalised instruction could readily be called a tutorial.
- Individualised training in research where students report to the responsible lecturer on a regular basis to evaluate and guide their work on a research essay. This is a diminutive example at undergraduate level of the role of the promoter at doctoral level or the supervisor at master's level.
- The seminar at both undergraduate (preferably only third-year) level and post-graduate level. The emphasis is on a particularised theme which is studied separately from the course offered in the lectures but still has some link with the general trend of the course. Active student participation, a planned and very definite programme of study designed and developed in advance by the lecturer, and regular report-backs by the students are the essential characteristics of the seminar.

3. THE SEMINAR

A clear distinction must be made between four levels of seminar presentations:

3.1

The third-year level where a definite link with the broad field of study covered in the lectures is essential. One example: the third-year students in General History have four lecture periods and two seminar periods per week. The class is divided into different seminar groups of not more than 10-12 per group. Attendance is absolutely compulsory and credits are awarded for active participation. This participation is distinct from written reports or feedback that is built into the programme. The broad fields covered in the lectures are post-Second World War American and European history or the history of international relations. One seminar course which we have been presenting for the past ten years is a detailed discussion of the historical development of the American political system and process based on an analysis of the changing interpretation and application of the American constitution.

3.2

The honours level where formal lectures have been replaced by the seminar method. Students are provided with a study programme and a reading list for the entire course. They meet once a week for three hours. Each student must report back on his reading and an intensive discussion of the issues raised in the programme is actively led by the lecturer involved. One lecturer only is responsible for a particular course. A number of written reports are required in the course of the programme. One example from the General History course:

Theme of study: Nationalism, sovereignty and ethnicity in contemporary Europe.

The course opens with an introductory lecture in which the programme is outlined and the background to the general theme and essential issues involved are outlined.

The students are then given specific guidance on the method of instruction and their role and obligations. The books on the core reading list are removed from general circulation in the library and put on reserve. That ensures that all participating students have equal access to the essential reading.

The programme sets specific topics with leading questions for every week's seminar meeting and the allocation of specific work or responsibilities is discussed with the students.

Each seminar meeting is a report-back and a discussion of the topics clearly spelled out in the programme.

The examination at the end of the course is based on this programme and reading.

3.3

The M.A. level in what is sometimes called a structured course, often described as M.A. by coursework.⁴ This particular course is closer to the original meaning and intention of the seminar method than the previous two. Students meet as a group only 9 times during the entire course. Individual discussions between lecturer and students can take place as often as the students wish or feel a need to do so. The course is divided into three parts:

- Two pre-selected areas of study based on the available expertise in the Department. In each area students have to complete four seminars of a size and standard higher than the "research essay" at honours level.
- A thesis on a topic chosen by the student from the two broad areas of study. The research and writing of the thesis are based on the individual interaction between the supervisor and the student.

The seminar method is restricted to the set part of the course. The lecturer is responsible for designing the programme. That means he will explain the broad outlines of the course, the historical setting of the selected area of study and provide the students with a list of topics for seminars grouped according to guidelines explained to the students. They then select their seminar topics in consultation with the lecturer and the other participants involved. Dates spread over the year are agreed upon and they are then free to start their research and reading. They frequently interact with each other and may even prefer to occasionally consult with the lecturer as a group. The written papers, often called seminars, are handed in a week or two before the scheduled meeting. Copies are provided to each member of the group. The lecturer has thus carefully reviewed the paper or essay before presentation and the students have been given the opportunity to read each other's work. That allows for a free discussion of the papers in the seminar. Each student is given 20-30 minutes to summarise and explain his work. An intensive discussion follows. At the end of the course a three-hour written exam based

on these papers and seminar discussions is set.

One important difference between this example of the seminar method and the original purpose of the seminar is that there is rather limited emphasis on research methodology and strategies. The understanding, interpretation and meaning of the issues under discussion are the focus of the seminars. The interdisciplinary features of a particular issue or problem will figure more prominently than anything else. How does the political scientist, the economist or the sociologist look at this issue? What are their contributions to developing a better understanding of the meaning and significance of the topic under discussion? Primary research is restricted to available printed sources. The research is based on library material, not archival sources.

- 3.4 The last category of seminars is the doctoral seminar. The basic feature of and requirement for doctoral study is original archival research. In theory it is possible to conduct research on a topic from so-called General History in overseas archives and submit a doctoral thesis. In practice doctoral research is restricted to topics linked to Southern African history based on local archives extended to overseas collections as the topic may require. The most important difference between the doctoral seminar and the other seminars is the reversed roles of student and lecturer which reflects the higher standards and requirements of original scholarly research. The seminar is usually attended by one student (the doctoral candidate) and a number of subject specialists for history and related disciplines in the faculty. Discussion is more focused on research methodology and strategies. The list of sources consulted, the research technique applied and the general research design receives substantial attention.

4. BLOODLESS TECHNICIANS OR CREATIVE SCHOLARS?

The intellectual dilemma in planning units of study at postgraduate level was well stated by Leopold von Ranke in the early nineteenth century: to understand universal history one must first know the specific events of history; but to know the specific one must first understand the universal. In the late fifties the American Historical Association undertook a study of the education of historians in the United States. More

than a century after Ranke the same problem was expressed in modern-day terminology: designing a programme of study that will strike the right balance between the generalist and the specialist, the publicist and the good teacher: "Is a badly written article on a minute subject given the minor importance it deserves, or does it count just about as much as the published development of a new theme with insight and skill? ... I would, however, plead for a fuller recognition of the truly distinguished teacher, even if his literary output is small. There are men who go on learning all their lives but who never get down to putting their knowledge on paper. ... There are scholars ... who diffuse wisdom in their classes, wisdom that is the fruit of reflection and experience, but who have a meager output in terms of highly specialized scholarship." In his presidential introduction to the report Dexter Perkins writes: "We ought never to surrender the desire to know more, and to know more deeply. But we must take care, in our developing scholarship, that we do not become mere bloodless technicians, examining the trivial for our own delectation, sacrificing the deeper values of history for the lesser ones."⁵

Ranke is often undeservedly accused by his detractors of leading history into the barren field of antiquarianism by his emphasis on reconstructing events in the minutest detail - blow by blow history whose intellectual excitement only consists of drawn-out arguments about the correct text, the dating of events or the precise description of what happened when. The emphasis today is more on the discussion of the meaning and interpretation of events, the development of perspectives and the acceptability or suitability of theories and explanations.

The combination of lecture, seminar and research essay provides the ideal opportunity to balance breadth of view and depth of specialised knowledge. There are, however, a number of important considerations that must guide our thinking and planning.

5. GUIDELINES FOR CREATIVE SEMINAR PRESENTATIONS

- 5.1 The seminar method can only succeed if the presenter or leader has a thorough knowledge of the subject and a particular ability to communicate with students. Laurence Vessey has identified the personal relationship fostered between teacher and student as the essence of the seminar method.⁶ A lot depends on the leader's personal magnetism and inspirational qualities. Leader and students are supposed to be equals in the seminar - but a strong-

minded scholar can mould his students into disciples.

5.2 The instructor must be challenging, demanding, critical and yet encouraging. He must be engaged in research and must be well informed about the history of the period and the topic of the seminar. He must convey to them the intellectual challenge and excitement that will stimulate their creative abilities. His preparedness and enthusiasm must be seen and experienced by the students.

5.3 The design and planning of the course must be done beforehand and the students must be under the impression that the programme really presents an intellectual challenge and opportunity. They must know what is expected of them and they must be made thoroughly aware of the standards and requirements set.

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