

# The Role and Purpose of Seminars in your Studies

Seminars are a well-established part of the learning process in UK HE. They are intended for students to discuss and clarify their own ideas and learn from both their tutors and each other. They also provide training in the ability to present, explain and defend your ideas, which are important life skills (sometimes referred to as 'Soft Skills', needed in the workplace, for interviews, consulting experts, receiving and understanding advice and delivering professional presentations. Seminars give practice in these general skills and help you to develop confidence.

## **Different Types of Seminar**

Seminars can be *tutor-led* or *student-led*: In tutor-led seminars, the tutor directs the students' contributions - perhaps asking based on the lecture programme. This gives you a chance to check and clarify understanding and make sure that the main issues are clear. Students are expected to comment, ask questions and check understanding. You can also ask about examples of applications of theories etc.

In student-led seminars, students - often two or three together - prepare topics to present to the group and lead the discussion. Tutors are present to comment and help. Students are given topics (based on reading), present an overview to the group and raise issues, in turn. Some preparation is expected by all.

## **The Nature of Learning from Seminars**

By listening to others, we can check our own understanding against theirs - what is similar, what is different. Academic integrity requires an awareness of different points of view or perspectives on an issue, question or problem. By explaining our own ideas, we examine our understanding and make new links in our thinking, which happens more easily than just through reading or listening and writing. Seminars provide you with an important



opportunity to activate what you may have learned passively from your reading and lectures and to test your understanding of the ideas of others and the ideas you are developing for yourself. Learning is co-operative and tutors can find out what goes on in students' heads through seminars. They find out where there are gaps in understanding and what help students need.

## **Why doesn't my tutor just give us the information we need, after all, she's the expert?**

Learning is not just about memorisation of the ideas of others, but also about exploring and applying what you know. Seminars are an opportunity to practise this. A thorough understanding of your subject develops most effectively as a result of active involvement in and contribution to organised and structured discussion. Students are not expected to be experts, but they are expected to demonstrate intellectual curiosity, to think about, For example, WHY things happened the way they did, WHAT influenced them and to predict or suggest HOW things work or might turn out in the future. The acquisition of knowledge is wasted if you can't use it and share it within your academic or professional community.

## **Seminar Preparation**

Always make sure you have done some preparatory reading, note-taking and note-making, even if you are not individually responsible for leading a seminar to ensure you will have something to say. You can prepare comments or questions about aspects of the topic that you do not understand or which are not clear, then take the initiative for guiding or sustaining a discussion.

## **Seminar Participation**

Examining ideas and discussing them makes for better understanding. The function of lectures is primarily the transfer of information, but seminars provide the opportunity to explore this in more detail, understand it and critically question it. Learning and the construction of knowledge requires active investigation and challenge of the contributions of authorities not simply passive acceptance and reproduction.