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HELP

SHEETS

Planning and Teaching A First-Year Undergraduate Seminar

Teaching students is one of the most enjoyable and rewarding experiences when working in a university. The level of practical support and resources for first time teachers, however, often varies between institutions. While we often rely on informal networks in order to help us through our first experience of teaching, sometimes postgraduates or early career researchers can find it difficult to balance the expectations of teaching alongside research. Preparation for seminars can take a lot of time in terms of reading material, but also requires novel and challenging kinds of emotional labour. This is especially the case when it comes to facilitating seminars for first-year undergraduates.

This helpsheet is specifically geared towards the unique challenge of teaching first-year undergraduate students in English Literature and related subjects, where textual discussion and close-reading is central to the workings of a seminar. That said, this sheet also refers to the educational context of many undergraduate students, and a lot of this advice is applicable to other humanities subjects, and to first-year teaching more generally.

Teaching students who have very recently finished qualifications at school and college-level is a difficult task, not least because these students are learning for the first time how to interact in a seminar environment. These students come with varying expectations of what learning (and teaching) at a university is like. The liminal status of first-year students means it is some of the most challenging work that happens in the academy. Leading first year seminars involves helping students to read critically in ways that they are often unfamiliar with.

Teaching first-year students means helping people who are still learning how to ‘be’ in a university seminar space. As we know, often such students are coping with a significant

transition. It may also mean helping mature students to access course materials and build good relationships with younger students, a situation which is unique to this kind of environment.

What follows are suggestions for ways of thinking about and performing university teaching, drawn mainly from the experiences of postgraduate students teaching during their studies. Such suggestions are proffered in full acknowledgement of the precarity of working life for ECRs and postgraduates, and the extreme obstacles faced by staff preparing materials while employed on hourly-paid contracts.

Before the module begins:

- Talk to experienced members of staff in your department, ask for advice or guidance. Some departments with have a mentor scheme set up, or will make sure that new teachers have someone to go to for advice. If something like this isn't established in your department, you could suggest an experienced member of staff set it up it as good practice.

- Talk to peers/fellow lecturers on the module. This could be an informal meet-up to share ideas and suggest material. Getting other perspectives on the core reading can often make you feel much more confident in the seminar room. Peers can also help you to know where to focus in-seminar reading and questions.

- Find out where the department keeps learning support plans or other materials related to specific learning requirements for students. This information will help when facilitating student responses in the seminar. Also, knowing that a student has a learning support plan means you're better able to talk through with them about how best they might learn in the seminar.

- Check you can access registers and have keys for rooms you're teaching in. You may also want to check what kind of equipment the room has (SmartBoard, working speakers) as this might influence your planning.

When preparing for the seminar:

- While reading over the set texts, consider what specific parts of them you might focus on in the seminar. Which passages or scenes would help to support a discussion of the texts? What parts of the text are going to be most accessible to a wide-range of reading competencies? What passages might some students *want* to respond to? What possible contestations of meaning and interpretation might you anticipate? Is there a 'seminar question' that is supposed to be the overarching theme of the session? If so, think through how you can shift the conversation so it goes some way towards answering or critiquing the question.

- First-year students are often still learning about the expectations of university, and so you may want to choose parts of the text which are fairly accessible, or can be readily put on a hand-out. If students don't bring the reading with them, having a short hand-out prepared means the whole seminar group can engage in the same task. Obviously, this doesn't mean students shouldn't be told that reading and resources are their responsibility. At the same time, undergraduates should be supported while learning how to prepare to be in the seminar space.

- You could write out a list of questions to guide discussion throughout the period, from the general and more accessible (i.e. Why does the text begin like this? What are the broad themes of this text?) to more specific and detailed inquiries which might come towards the end of the seminar (e.g. What other possible interpretations have come to light? What terms and/or ideas might you contest or explore in an essay about this text? In what ways?)

- If the set reading is particularly challenging, think about ways to talk about this in the seminar room. This could involve acknowledging that textual difficulty is an essential part of humanities degrees, and that seminars are there to help learn how to decode and re-read difficult texts. You might also consider how summaries and precis of difficult thinkers or texts would give students more confidence in trying to think through (and think *with*) quite challenging primary material.

- There is no model for a perfect seminar, given how different groups interact together, and how different rooms are equipped. It is important to remember,

however, that seminars are not processes for solving or fixing primary material so that students can produce an essay. Seminars could be thought of as a particular node in a process of discussion and consideration which students engage with in different ways. You might want to think about how any mandatory tasks could lead to further questions.

- Striking a balance between being effectively prepared and not working beyond what your contract indicates is very difficult, and this reality is very often not addressed by university institutions. Make sure you get clarification on exactly how you are being paid for preparation and teaching time, and talk to other staff members about sharing resources and ideas. Find out how your rate of pay works - what hours are included for prep, marking, and teaching or other contact time. If you can, it's a good idea to keep a log of the hours that you work preparing and marking.

In the seminar room:

- Preparation is important to feeling comfortable in the seminar room. Make sure you've got sufficient copies of the reading, notes and any other resources.

- It's important in the first seminar, and early seminars, to try and establish what makes for a good seminar room atmosphere. It's often a good idea to elicit this from the students themselves. What works will vary from group-to-group and will depend on the institution too: are seminars assessed?; are there presentations from students?. Putting a list together with students makes it clear from the off, and establishes a framework within which you work *with each other* to refer back to if seminars go off track down the line.

- As part of the above, make the students aware that they are as responsible for the seminar room as a space for discussion as yourself. The discussion is generated by them, and is guided by you.

- Very often first-year teaching is a balancing act between guiding students through a text and giving them the confidence to explore it themselves. This is a difficult approach that requires sensitivity to what students say and how they react. Try to

allow students to respond to one another, and encourage responses from other students by asking questions which lead on from what another student has said.

- Helping to re-articulate what students have said, without speaking for them, is one way of making students feel like they belong in the seminar room. Referring to a position from another student ("so as [name] helped to show us earlier, we could think of this text as…") or helping them to see how their contribution suggests a particular kind of interpretation ("it sound like you might agree with [x position]? Who else shares a similar response?) can be a really empowering thing in what can sometimes be an intimidating space, regardless of how comfortable we try and make the atmosphere. Showing how a student's observations have weight and importance for the ways the text is thought about is a really important function of first year seminar teaching. It isn't always easy to do, but doing it well will give students confidence and argumentative agency.

- Don't be afraid to acknowledge the power dynamics of the seminar room, and to explain that you're not there in order to confirm answers or to talk for 30 minutes about whatever the topic is at hand. Being faced with silence can be daunting, but allowing students proper time to think and consider the questions at hand *in the seminar space* is a fruitful and freeing exercise. Don't be afraid to build in time for reflection, for close reading which isn't specifically directed, or to change tactic if discussion isn't developing student responses. Spontaneously giving students 5 minutes to talk in pairs, with some prompts to think about, is one way of moving seminar discussion along. You could also give 10 or 15 minutes over to reading and re-reading midway through the seminar, to let students rethink their initial responses to a text.

After the seminar:

- The time after the seminar can be used for personal tutorials, if your contract and hours permit. Very often, though, this time might be used informally just to check on any students who appear to be having trouble engaging with seminars. It might be that asking the student what would help them can give you strategies to use with the group as a whole. For instance, asking students at the start of the seminar for

one contribution each, that can be written on the board without any other form of mediation, provides a map for discussion which is defined by them, and which you can refer to. It also allows students who find oral contributions difficult to come prepared at the start of the seminar.

- In the closing minutes of the seminar, you might want to ask the group how they thought the seminar went, or how they might improve it next time. This isn't to encourage endless reflection, but can help students recognise when they've had a good discussion or where contributions might be developed.

- Some seminars do go badly, and this is a fact of all teaching and not something to blame yourself solely for. Be realistic about the fact that helping to guide discussion for a class of students is difficult, and think about what you might be able to do to change the dynamic. Talking to peers is really helpful here, as everyone will have experience to draw upon. Some groups, however, will be difficult to facilitate, for myriad reasons that have nothing to do with the seminar tutor themselves.

- If a student has health problems or other concerns regarding their life in and around their university course, they might talk to you about it after the seminar. This means that knowing about available student support and counselling is extremely important, so that you can provide the student with the information they might need. You are often the first point of contact for students with problems, and feeling confident that the student has support available is very important. It's important to note here that pastoral care is part of the role of personal tutors and student support teams, not seminar tutors, although the reality is that very often seminar tutors are a first point of contact if there is a problem. With more and more students suffering from mental health problems (higher debt, more students having to work alongside study, demands of the course, etc) it can be difficult to know when and how to engage in this type of care, and what the limits are. This is particularly hard to remember as a new teacher/lecturer. In the main, keeping good communication between fellow teaching staff (who might be sharing a group with you) and with personal tutors and pastoral staff will mean you can clearly direct students where they need to go for advice and guidance.

This BACLS Helpsheet was compiled by staff and postgraduate students at the University of Brighton.