

THE SEMINAR PROJECT

Exploring what students consider to be the issues with the provision of seminars by various department across Warwick.

ARESA, YINKA (UG)

WIHEA Fellow and English and History Undergraduate 2023

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About the Project

The Seminar Project, originally titled 'Operation Seminar' is a project aimed at defining seminars and their significance by carrying out a series of surveys across different departments. By establishing what student's definition of seminars are, the project aimed to explore ways to enhance inclusivity, productivity, and engagement in seminars. The project while focusing on the experiences of students across different years, finds its important to draw a balance between the perspectives of both staff and students regarding their expectations and actual experiences of seminars. By analysing similarities and differences, the project ultimately reaches a comprehensive and effective conclusion that reflects varied experiences and presenting solutions. The project aimed to contribute to the WIHEA's strategic areas of student engagement and inclusion, and curriculum design and development.

What the Project Aim to Achieve:

There are a lot of understands as to what a seminar is and how it should be used. This project aims to determine a firm definition that allows for inclusion, productivity and enthusiasm within both student and staff. The main aims/questions that we hope to have an answer to by the end of the project are:

- a) Understanding what a seminar is according to students.
- b) Understanding the skills that are gained from seminars.
- c) Understanding the issues that causes lack of participation in seminars? (Language? Lack of content warning? Layout of the seminar? Cultural differences? An understanding/lack thereof of how to use the reading list?)
- d) Understanding what the culture of the university space and the culture around seminars are and how well established they are across departments.
- e) Understanding if there's really a connection between culture and an inclusive/productive seminar.
- f) Understanding different approaches to seminars by tutors across different department.

The Approach:

Stage 1- Making of the Modern World

- a) What makes a good seminar?
- b) What makes a bad seminar?
- c) Do you think ground rules are important to the success of a seminar?
- d) What does ground rules look like?
- e) How should difficult subjects be dealt with in seminars?
- f) Do you think content warnings are valuable?
- g) When should they be used?

Stage 2- The Survey

Survey Design: A survey was administered to first-year, second-year, and final-year students across various departments at a university. The survey included questions pertaining to the four key issues of room set up, prep material, openness to

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conversation, and the purpose of seminars. Participants were asked to provide their views and preferences regarding these issues.

Sample: The sample comprised a diverse group of students from various departments, ensuring representation across different academic disciplines. The participants' responses were anonymised to maintain confidentiality.

Stage 3- The Podcast

The project is centred around developing a 3-part research podcast, covering both the opinions of students and staff on the seminar experience. Regarding content, the opinions which we will draw upon will be generated from anonymous feedback forms from students and staff circulated across different departments. The podcasts will focus on the experiences of the student coordinators who have considered the responses of all the students from their year from the survey.

Project Impact:

The resources produced will be invaluable for the academic development and transition of first years into the academic world of university. Finding a definition of seminars has further enabled us to suggest approaches ensuring seminars are not only inclusive in allowing diversity of opinions, but also in understanding how room layout, content warning and other elements allow for increased productivity, enthusiasm, and engagement from students.

Learning Outcomes/Moving Forward:

We hope to be able to share the findings of the research through the podcast and talks with other universities, comparing findings and possibly leading to a collaborative project. In addition to coming to an understanding of what a seminar is, the project has been able to help both students and staff consider and learn from such questions as:

- a) What are the skills gained from a seminar?
- b) What is the culture of the university space, and why (if a relationship is established) is it important to the seminar space?
- c) Is there any considerations that the course/module structure needs to take to optimize the seminar space (e.g., how best to use reading lists?)

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The Podcast

The podcast is split into 3 episodes focusing on first year, second year and third year experiences. Hosted by Yinka Aresa, with guest speakers who were student coordinators for the project. The student responses from the survey were analysed qualitatively using thematic analysis. The data were categorised according to the four key issues, and recurring themes which were identified by the first-year students on the *Making of the Modern World* module in the History Department.

The four areas of development are:

- a) The Set Up of the Room
- b) Prep Material
- c) Openness of Conversations
- d) Purpose of Seminars

Based on the comparative analysis of student responses, it can be concluded that the key issue requiring the most improvement in seminar delivery across different departments is the openness to conversation and the overall purpose of seminars. Students consistently emphasised the need for a more inclusive and stimulating environment that encourages active participation and ensures every student feels comfortable expressing their ideas. Addressing this key issue will contribute significantly to enhancing seminar delivery and promoting a conducive learning atmosphere within diverse academic departments. Further research and targeted interventions can be undertaken to improve the openness to conversation and create more engaging and productive seminar experiences for students.

Episode 1: Year One Reflections with **Maureen Onwunali** (*Politics and International Relations*)

Episode 2: Year Two Reflections with **Jessica Anderson** (*Politics and International Relations*) ft. **Maureen Onwunali** (*Politics and International Relations*)

Episode 3: Year Three Reflections with **Dianne Danquah** (*Sociology*) and **Nosa Charles-Novia** (*Film Studies & English and Comparative Literary Studies*)

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Pictures from the Podcast

Some behind the scenes photos.



From Left: (1) Yinka Aresa, (2) Jessica Anderson, (3) Jessica, Yinka and Maureen



Dianne Danquah and Nosa Charles-Novia

Maureen Onwunali and Jessica Anderson

Maureen Onwunali



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The Survey

A survey was conducted with the assistance of 5 Student coordinators across 8 distinct departments at the University of Warwick. These departments comprise English, History, Law, Chemistry, Maths, Sociology, Psychology, and Film. A total of 61 responses were received for the surveys, although the project reached a total of 345 students and staff members. The responses were collected anonymously. The project was particularly concerned with the student experience in these diverse departments. The objective was to gather feedback from an equal number of students from all academic years. The questions in the questionnaire were formulated based on responses from first-year students in the 'Making of the Modern World' unit, which is studied by all first-year students in the History department. Additionally, the questions were supplemented by interviews conducted with senior tutors, heads of departments, and other staff members across the various departments. Gathering the perspectives of staff members was relevant to the exploration of the student experience that this project aimed to undertake, as they were the ones who provided the experiences of the seminars.

Total number of students and staff reached across the whole project:

Options (Across Departments)	Responses
First Year	170 (49%)
Second Year	75 (22%)
Third Year	50 (14%)
Fourth Year/Post Grad	30 (9%)
Staff	20 (6%)
Total	345

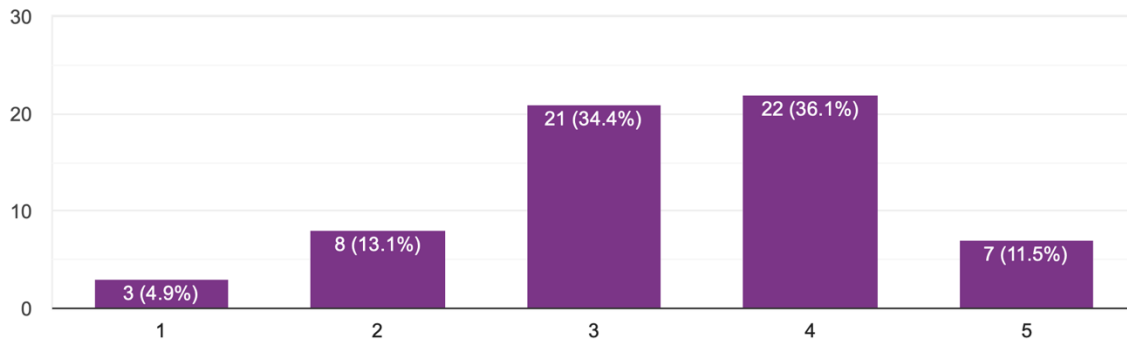
Total number of students and staff reached by the anonymous survey analysed in this document:

Options (Across Departments)	Responses
First Year	17 (28%)
Second Year	19 (31%)
Third Year	16 (26%)
Fourth Year/Post Grad	4 (7%)
Staff	5 (8%)
Total	61

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The Survey Results

Question 1: From 1-5 how productive do you find seminars?



Generally, the responses, suggest that they found seminars productive, with a strong majority at either a 3 or 4 rating. However, further questioning of what they found that there were a lot of improvement that students expected in order to make seminars more productive.

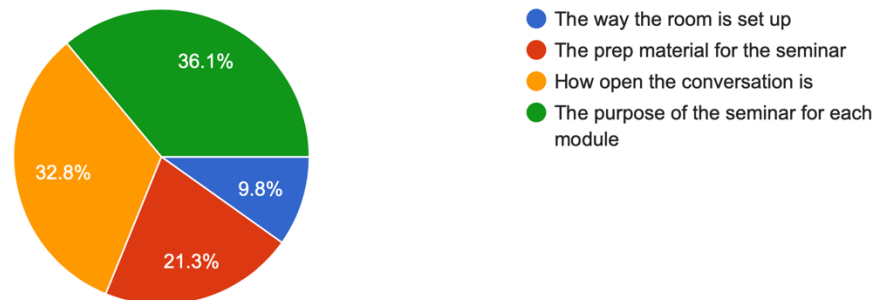
Question 2: What is the reason for your rating?

The opinions of first, second, and third-year students demonstrate an evolving perspective on seminar productivity. First-year students tend to focus on engagement, tutor support, and the sense of community. Second-year students express concerns about community, structure, and workload management. Third-year students emphasise productive discussions, effective seminar structures, and the importance of focused preparation. These variations highlight the importance of addressing different needs and continuously improving seminar formats to enhance productivity and learning outcomes. To better illustrate these differences, the responses have been split into the different years. A short summary has been provided in the following pages of the 5 main areas of concern raised by all year groups. After this, Further insight and examples of student response are provided.

1. Engagement and Interaction (Building Community)
2. Tutor Effectiveness
3. Community and Sense of Belonging
4. Preparation and Workload
5. Seminar Structure

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Question 3: What do you think needs to be improved about seminars?



Following on from the information gathered from first year students from the History department '*Making of the Modern World*', it was identified what the four main concerns for improvement for students are and students through this survey are asked to comment on these four areas.

- a) **Room Set Up:** Across departments, students expressed concerns about the room set up during seminars. Several students highlighted the need for a less formal and more intimate environment, emphasising the importance of closeness and group work. Others mentioned the negative impact of conducting seminars in lecture halls, advocating for smaller classroom-sized rooms to foster better student-staff interaction. While this issue was mentioned by multiple participants, it did not emerge as the most prevalent concern in comparison to other key issues.
- b) **Prep Material:** Many students discussed the significance of prep material in enhancing seminar discussions. They appreciated tutors who provided guided questions before the seminar, enabling in-depth research and a better understanding of the topic. However, some students expressed dissatisfaction with broad questions that stifled productive discussion. While this issue received notable attention from the participants, it did not emerge as the primary area requiring improvement.
- c) **Openness to Conversation:** The issue of openness to conversation within seminars garnered considerable attention from the students across departments. Numerous participants voiced their desire for a more inclusive and stimulating environment, where all students felt comfortable expressing their thoughts. Some students raised the fact that some tutors come into each seminar with their own ideas and are not always open to new ideas, often rejecting student points. The need for facilitating open conversations and ensuring every student's participation was consistently emphasised. This key issue emerged as a significant area requiring improvement according to the student responses.
- d) **Purpose of Seminars:** students provided insights into the purpose of seminars within their departments. Some students expressed a desire for seminars to align more closely with traditional discussions, allowing for deeper engagement and the advancement of ideas. The lack of productive discussion and the dominance of a few confident individuals were identified as challenges. This issue came out as the most prevalent issue needing reform. Students speak to

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the importance of clarifying aims and objectives during the first weeks of a module beginning. Seminars are always going to be different across departments and seminars because of different teaching practises, however, the lack of a defined purpose furthers this disparity negatively because it suggests to students that all seminars serve the same purpose and so students should act similarly. This research has shown that this is not the case.

Question 4: Tell us something else you would like to improve about seminars.

The insights shared by students provide valuable guidance for improving seminar practices and creating engaging, inclusive, and productive learning environments. Addressing these concerns will help the departments enhance the overall seminar experience and support the academic growth of students.

Seminar Duration:

Some student expressed the opinion that longer seminars are more productive, allowing for more in-depth discussions. They felt that shorter seminars, typically lasting 1 hour, often cut the conversation short. This perspective suggests that extending the duration of seminars may provide more time for meaningful engagement, deeper analysis, and exploration of diverse viewpoints. However, for other students an increase in the length of seminars is only appreciated if they become more structured and open as they worry that it would just mean more silence.

"Some seminar tutors will have questions planned in advance, encourage small group discussion, or ask specific materials to be prepared before class such as reading summaries or particular topics to summarize to the class. Other seminar tutors will ask far broader questions such as 'what did we think about the reading?' which generates very little discussion. In these cases, the one or two individuals that are the most confident speak to fill the silence, and little productive discussion or advancement of ideas occurs."

-Second Year, PPE Student

"Room set up is very important, less structure, more of a closeness. Guided questions about the text before the seminar could help for more in-depth research and understanding in the seminar. Group work within the seminar is always important!"

-Second Year, Law Student

Releasing Seminar Questions Beforehand:

Students highlighted a concern regarding the release of seminar questions before the session. They felt that this practice detracts from the seminar experience as it gives some participants an advantage, while others may not have had sufficient time to prepare. The student suggested that not releasing the questions beforehand could encourage open conversations and greater participation among all students. This

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perspective reflects the need to strike a balance between pre-seminar preparation and fostering inclusive discussions during the session. Although the majority of students find it useful to have questions to aid their preparation.

"Stop having seminars in lecture halls if it's not necessary. If there's less than 35 people, have them in small classroom-sized rooms. Lecture theatres put me off asking questions and also prevent staff from interacting with students as much as they can in smaller environments."

-Third Year, Sociology Student

Content Focus and Seminar Tutor's Role:

Students expressed a desire for seminars to focus less on exercise sheets and more on intellectually stimulating content related to the module's subject matter. They suggested that exploring applications and witnessing the thought process of the seminar tutor would be more beneficial. This perspective emphasises the importance of aligning seminar content with the module's objectives and engaging students in higher-level thinking and critical analysis.

"Warwick should send people in to monitor the quality of seminars, particularly if they are the module lead or a lecturer, as I feel like they get away with poor seminars more than PhD students, who in my experience, are better at creating a comfortable seminar experience."

-Fourth year, Sociology Student

"I like it when tutors ask us to discuss in groups first, then feedback to the rest of the group. This is really useful, and I wish it was in all seminars as often other groups discuss different things. I also like when the seminar tutor comes round to individually talk to students/groups as it allows us to ask questions which we might feel uncomfortable asking in a big group."

-First Year, Psychology Student

Improved Seminar Practices:

Students provided a list of suggestions for improving seminar practices. They advocated for shorter and more examinable readings, the use of presentations as guides rather than additional lectures, the presence of committed seminar leaders with relevant expertise, small group discussions in a relaxed atmosphere, and the incorporation of quizzes to reinforce learning. The student also highlighted the need for discussions on how to answer exam questions, including the provision of example answers and practice opportunities. This perspective indicates a desire for more interactive and practical elements within seminars to enhance learning and assessment preparation.

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"As far as I am aware, most if not all of our seminars are essentially workshops. Rooms are often not fit for purpose (would like seminars to enable some degree of group work). Also, would have liked to tick 'how open the conversation is; many students do not feel able to speak up in a seminar. What does not happen enough in Chemistry is some sort of 'Discussion'. It would be great if this could be enhanced by some kind of seminar in the true sense."

-Second Year, Chemistry Student

Variety and Inclusivity in Humanities Seminars:

Student specifically addressed humanities seminars, suggesting that a less lesson-like atmosphere could be beneficial, especially when there are no lectures for the module. They emphasized the importance of activities that allow students to get to know their classmates and foster general conversation within the group, particularly in larger seminar groups. This perspective highlights the potential benefits of incorporating interactive and community-building activities in humanities seminars to create a supportive and engaging learning environment.

"In History, I hate that all seminars have to contribute towards student assessment in our department - I feel these benefits white middle class students used to debates and discussions and is not good for those from less traditional backgrounds (e.g. working class/different ethnic or racial). We already know that black and ethnic minority students feel uncomfortable in the classroom environment, so this assessment model does not benefit them. I feel my department never listens to my concerns about this."

-Third Year, History Student

Assessment Model and Inclusivity in History Seminars:

One Student expressed concerns about the assessment model in History seminars, suggesting that it may favour white middle-class students who are accustomed to debates and discussions. They argued that this model may disadvantage students from less traditional backgrounds, such as those from working-class or diverse ethnic or racial backgrounds. The student felt that their concerns were not being listened to by the department. This perspective raises important considerations regarding the inclusivity of assessment methods and the need to address potential disparities in student experiences within the seminar setting.

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First Years on the Productivity of Seminars

The comments provided by first-year students regarding the productivity of seminars at the University of Warwick reflect a range of opinions and experiences. While some students find seminars engaging and beneficial, others feel that they may not contribute significantly to their learning.

“I find seminar's really useful in terms of sharing my concerns/ queries with fellow students on the same module. It helps create a sense of community and makes me feel less alone when studying as I remember other students are also undertaking the module too. The productivity of seminars is sometimes dependent on how engaged the seminar tutor is/ the way they structure the seminar. From my experience, seminar tutors have been really helpful in providing further notes/clarification on certain modules in the course.”

-First Year, School of Law Student

The varying factors that affect the productivity of seminars are highlighted by the students through their responses. These factors include: the module, seminar tutor, and class dynamics. Students mention that sometimes the assigned readings are not engaging enough to maintain their interest, and at times, the seminars themselves do not offer substantial long-term benefits in terms of usability in examinations or other assessments. This was particularly expressed by humanities students. This perspective emphasises the need for more engaging and relevant materials in seminars to enhance student involvement and learning outcomes. Students have their expectations for what a seminar should be in terms of the definitions of what they deem the purpose of the seminar to be. Unfortunately, this seems to contradict a lot with staff who have other aims or fail to clarify what they intend the structure and purpose of their seminars to be.

Some seminars are very engaging due to their use of group work, interesting visual PowerPoints, questions from the tutor, worksheets, competitions within the class, debates, music in the background when appropriate, creative tasks to understand texts better etc.

-First Year, English and Theatre Studies Student

Students emphasised that certain seminars are highly engaging. They mention various interactive elements like group work, visual PowerPoints, tutor-led questions, worksheets, competitions, debates, and even background music when appropriate. These views highlight the positive impact of such engaging activities, suggesting that they contribute to a more immersive and effective learning experience. Additionally, they note the seating arrangement as a crucial factor, mentioning that sitting in a circle around a table creates a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere, removing the rigid

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'school feel' and enhancing engagement. Students see seminars as an opportunity for peer interaction and support. They find the sharing of concerns and enquiries with fellow students on the same module to be beneficial in fostering a sense of community. This aspect reduces feelings of isolation during studies and reinforces the understanding that others are also undertaking the same module. Additionally, they appreciate the helpfulness of seminar tutors in providing further notes and clarification on certain modules. But it is identified that this varies significantly between tutors even in the same department. This perspective underscores the significance of a supportive learning environment and effective guidance from tutors in seminar settings. However, there is an implication in the responses that the 'purpose' of the seminars are not well established during the first handful of seminars at the start of the module.

Most seminars I find entirely not productive however this is dependent on the tutor.

-First Year, History and Sociology Student

Students express their scepticism about seminars' ability to facilitate new learning, suggesting that lectures serve this purpose better. They seem to differentiate between the two learning formats, implying that lectures are more suitable for acquiring new knowledge while seminars may be more effective for other aspects of the learning process, such as collaboration and discussion. However, their confusion comes from the lack of explanation about the difference or how each tutor is differentiating these two learning formats. Students explain that some tutors treat lectures and seminars the same way. It is particularly ineffective when the way is a return to school style learning where all they do is listen to the tutor speak. Other students raise concerns about the lack of active participation in seminars, making them feel unproductive. They also mention the inconvenience of traveling for 'lectures' and propose that transferring them online could improve accessibility and facilitate greater interaction. The view of moving lectures online is not one that is shared equally all students. In reflecting about their experience during the covid year, most students would rather everything be in-person.

We go over the readings which is useful, but nothing is targeted towards the summative tasks. We don't receive any support with our summative tasks except a quick 10-minute talk at the end of the seminar in week 10.

-First Year, Sociology Student.

Generally, this viewpoint reflects the need to encourage and facilitate meaningful student engagement during seminars to ensure their productivity. Additionally, students criticise the pace of seminars, suggesting that it may be either too fast or too slow, hindering their ability to grasp the content effectively. This perspective emphasises the importance of a balanced and well-structured seminar session that allows sufficient time for addressing difficult topics and answering student questions. This viewpoint furthers the request for moving lectures online to further differentiate them from seminars as it also allows for students to comprehend the given information

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in a conducive manner rather than at the fast or slow pace it might be delivered if in person.

Not many people talk in seminars, so it often does not feel productive. I have to travel an hour to get to my university for seminars and it can feel like a waste of my time when seminars could be transferred online, which would make them both more accessible and perhaps easier for people to interact with each other.

-First Year, History Student.

Overall, the analysis of first-year students' comments on seminar productivity reveals a diversity of experiences and perspectives. To enhance the productivity of seminars for first years, they find it crucial for educators to provide engaging and relevant materials, incorporate interactive elements, create a supportive learning environment, encourage active student participation, and ensure well-paced sessions that cater to the needs of all learners. Additionally, exploring the potential of online seminars or lectures as a way of further differentiating their differences and purpose could offer greater accessibility and opportunities for student interaction and productively access the information. By considering and addressing these aspects, universities can strive to optimise the effectiveness of seminars and enhance the overall learning experience for their students.

Positives of what seminar spaces can be according to first years:

1. Engaging seminars with interactive elements (group work, visual aids, competitions, debates, etc.).
2. Supportive environment for sharing concerns and queries with fellow students.
3. Sense of community and reduced feelings of isolation during studies.
4. Helpful seminar tutors providing further notes and clarification.
5. Comfortable and relaxed seating arrangements that foster engagement.

Negatives about what has been experienced according to first years:

1. Lack of engaging reading materials, leading to decreased interest.
2. Seminars not providing significant long-term benefits e.g., usability in summative assessments.
3. Limited active participation, making seminars feel unproductive.
4. Inconvenience of traveling to attend seminars that feel like lectures.
5. Inconsistent pacing and structure of seminars, hindering effective understanding of content.

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Second Years on the Productivity of Seminars

The comments provided by second-year students regarding the productivity of seminars at the University of Warwick reflect a range of opinions and experiences. While some students find seminars engaging and beneficial, others feel that they may not contribute significantly to their learning.

The structuring of a seminar varies immensely between seminar leads. Some seminars the conversation and debate flows easily in a tutor-lead environment, whereas in others, there are long stretches of silence due to the vague structure or sometimes lack thereof.

-Second Year, English and History Student

Students highlight that seminars are generally enjoyable and serve as a platform for engaging discussions. They emphasize that the seminar format allows ideas to emerge and enables students to test and challenge arguments with one another. This perspective highlights the value of seminars in fostering active participation and critical thinking among students. The variation in seminar structuring is noted by students, who points out the difference in the flow of conversation and debate depending on the seminar lead. They observe that some seminars are characterised by an easily flowing discussion in a tutor-led environment, while others are dominated by long periods of silence and vague structure. This highlights the importance of effective facilitation and guidance by seminar leads in creating an engaging and productive learning environment.

I sometimes feel that I do not gain anything from the seminars that I would not otherwise gain from completing the work independently. And the group work elements do not seem to be very productive.

-Second Year, Psychology Student

Students express concerns about the lack of community within seminars, which makes it challenging to explore ideas and challenge texts effectively. They mention not knowing people in their seminar groups 12 weeks into the module beginning because there is no attempt by the seminar tutor to foster any personal communications. The responsibility is completely left to the students. They mention a fear of looking foolish and point out the difficulty in discussing texts in relation to one's personal life experiences. This perspective suggests that a more inclusive and supportive environment is needed to encourage open dialogue and exploration of diverse perspectives. One student expresses a preference for discussing texts with friends on their course rather than in seminars. They mention issues with the engagement and inclusion of neurodiverse students and facing challenges with concentration during long seminars without breaks. They also note that some tutors tend to dominate the discussion, limiting opportunities for students to develop their own ideas. This perspective emphasizes the importance of inclusive practices and providing appropriate accommodations to cater to diverse learning needs.

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Some seminar tutors end up just speaking the whole time making it like a lecture and barely let you get a word in making the whole hour a complete waste of time. Some seminars also require you to have done too much prep work which is just unachievable and so you end up feeling on edge in case you get called on in seminar.

-Second Year, History Student

The impact of the seminar tutor on productivity is emphasised by all students. They note that many seminar tutors fail to create a comfortable environment, leading students to feel tested and discouraged from active participation. Additionally, some tutors monopolise the discussion, resembling a lecture format and leaving little room for student input. However, when a comfortable and open environment is established with a tutor, productive discussion and debate become possible. This viewpoint highlights the significance of tutor-student dynamics in influencing the productivity of seminars. Students express a lack of perceived value in seminars, indicating that they often feel they gain nothing additional from participating in seminars compared to completing the work independently. They also find the group work elements to be unproductive when it seems to be tagged on rather than structured for purpose. For humanities subjects, it was identified that group discussions are sometimes difficult out of fear of saying the wrong things or when fellow students have not completed the readings. As such the group discussions are just wasted minutes of irrelevant conversations or silence. As a solution, student request for tutors to be more structured and considered in their expectations. Additionally, they note that the content discussed in seminars may not be directly relevant to their exams. This viewpoint raises questions about the alignment between seminar content and desired learning outcomes.

Some seminars are very productive, but not all. I think it mostly depends on the TA.

-Second Year, Mathematics Student

Econ seminars are often closed to any conversations. We simply go through exercises, and I do not find this productive.

-Second Year, Economics Student

Good how the seminars go through more difficult questions but there is a lack of interactivity which makes it awkward when answering questions.

-Second Year, Mathematics Student

Students mention that the productivity of seminars often depends on going through exercise solutions, which is only helpful if they have attempted and failed to solve the exercise independently. This suggests that the relevance and effectiveness of seminar activities may vary depending on individual learning needs and prior knowledge. It is

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important to note that responses like this came mostly from Mathematics and Science based students.

They help me understand topics better because I can have discussions directly with teachers but we often either repeat what was in the reading or almost ignore the readings. There is rarely a balanced in-between.

-Second Year, English and History Student

Overall, the analysis of second-year students' comments highlights the complexity of seminar productivity. Positive aspects include engaging discussions, the emergence of ideas, and the opportunity to challenge arguments. However, concerns are raised regarding the lack of community, varying seminar structures, tutor dominance, and limited relevance of activities. To enhance the productivity of seminars, it is crucial to create inclusive and supportive environments, provide accommodations for diverse learning needs e.g., breaks between long seminar sessions, ensure effective facilitation by seminar leads, align seminar activities with learning objectives, and foster a balance between independent work and collaborative engagement. By addressing these factors, departments can strive to optimise the effectiveness of seminars and promote meaningful learning experiences for their students.

Positives of what seminar spaces can be according to second years:

1. Engaging discussions and the emergence of new ideas during seminars.
2. Opportunity to test and challenge arguments among peers without fear of judgement or ridicule.
3. Flowing conversation and debate in well-structured tutor-led seminars.
4. Productive discussions with friends on the course outside of seminars that can also then be incorporated into discussions.
5. Some seminar tutors fostering open discussion and debate, allowing for valuable learning experiences.

Negatives about what has been experienced according to second years:

1. Lack of community and difficulty exploring ideas or challenging texts in seminars.
2. Fear of looking foolish and limited discussion relating texts to personal experiences.
3. Variation in seminar structuring, with some sessions dominated by silence and vague structure.
4. Challenges faced by neurodiverse students, such as difficulty concentrating during long seminars without breaks.
5. Ineffective seminar tutors who create uncomfortable environments, monopolise discussions, or fail to facilitate student engagement.

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Third Years on the Productivity of Seminars

The comments provided by third-year students regarding the productivity of seminars at the University of Warwick reflect a range of opinions and experiences. While some students find seminars engaging and beneficial, others feel that they may not contribute significantly to their learning.

If successful they are my favourite part of my degree if we are able to have productive discussions and if they give us task to do because I think this is the best way to get everyone involved rather than relying on a few confident people to carry the discussion.

-Third Year, English Student

Students highlight seminars as an opportunity to test ideas, ask questions, and exchange thoughts. They acknowledge the potential for improvement by suggesting the need for more focused preparation, varied activities, and practiced skills. Students identify the importance of personal responsibility, stating that seminar productivity depends on their own commitment to studying. They acknowledge that if they haven't done the necessary work in a given week, seminars may not be as productive. As such, they recognize the value of seminars when they have adequately prepared. However, due to number of factors similar to those identified by first- and second-year students, the effectiveness in preparing for seminars are sometimes hindered by the seminar tutor for the module. Some tutors provide too much material for such a limited time that doesn't get explored, some tutors don't engage in conversations, so students feel as though preparation is not necessary and for some students, the arrangement of preparation materials are too complicated to find or understand. For example, some departments and their modules use between 3-4 online platforms to share information e.g., Moodle, Module Page, or Talis Aspire. This needs to be reduced for better navigation.

I've found that for the most part, my sociology seminars lead to some interesting discussion with the seminar tutor, but with some exceptions where seminars had to end early because nobody had anything to say. As for law seminars, they are generally productive because a list of questions about the content of that week is given, and during seminars we work through that list of questions. It's like getting a worksheet and then checking the answer during the seminar.

-Third Year, Law, and Sociology Student

The timing of seminars is a concern raised by students, specifically in the context of the humanities departments. They suggest that longer seminars with fewer participants would be more beneficial, allowing for in-depth discussions. While some students identify that productive discussions and engaging tasks make seminars engaging, they emphasise the importance of involving everyone rather than relying solely on a few confident individuals. Many students value the opportunity to contribute to and benefit from productive discussions however feel that more can be done to

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involve all students in the seminar. For example, the lack of structure and excessive reading requirements are cited as issues by one student. They express discomfort speaking in front of peers they perceive as more intelligent and highlight the need for a more supportive environment.

Most were poorly organised and often consisted of non-examinable content. There was just little reason to attend. In psychology, there was far too much reliance on reading excessively long papers, presentations were often used unnecessarily as if it was another lecture, not enough discussion, too large groups.

-Third Year, Psychology Student

Different experiences are noted across disciplines. Sociology seminars are generally engaging, leading to interesting discussions. In contrast, some Law seminars have faced challenges when there is a lack of participation. The use of predetermined questions in Law seminars is seen as beneficial, resembling a guided worksheet-style approach. The influence of seminar structure on teaching effectiveness is recognized by students. They highlight the positive impact of highlighting important passages within readings for discussion, particularly on complex topics. They express a preference for seminars that go beyond simply discussing thoughts on readings and advocate for smaller seminar sizes, particularly in postgraduate level mixed classes. Students find pre-given questions to be more productive than those worked through as a group or given only a couple of minutes to answer. One student expresses dissatisfaction with poorly organised seminars that focus on non-examinable content, leading to a lack of motivation to attend. They contrast this experience with an optional module that heavily featured discussion-based seminars, which they found interesting and meaningful. They highlight issues such as excessive reading, overreliance on presentations, inadequate discussion, large group sizes, and lacklustre supervision in certain cases.

Seminars are more workshops to go through questions. Those in which questions are given in advance are more productive than those where the answers are worked through as a group or given a couple minutes to answer the question before answers given.

-Third Year, Chemistry Student

These third-year students' comments reflect a range of experiences and perspectives regarding seminar productivity, emphasising the importance of structure, engagement, preparation, and meaningful discussions.

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Positives of what seminar spaces can be according to third years:

1. Seminars provide an opportunity to test ideas, ask questions, and exchange thoughts.
2. Productive discussions and engaging tasks make seminars enjoyable and valuable.
3. Highlighting important passages within readings assists learning and understanding complex topics.
4. Guided questions provided in advance during seminars help facilitate productive discussions.
5. Smaller seminar sizes are preferred, especially in postgraduate level mixed classes.

Negatives about what has been experienced according to third years:

1. Lack of structure and excessive reading requirements hinder seminar productivity.
2. Discomfort speaking in front of peers perceived as more intelligent.
3. Poor organization and non-examinable content make some seminars seem pointless.
4. Overreliance on presentations and insufficient discussion in certain subjects.
5. Large group sizes, inadequate supervision, and mundane tasks undermine seminar effectiveness.

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Conclusions on the Productivity and improvement of Seminars across the years

The opinions expressed by first, second, and third-year students provide valuable insights into their perceptions of seminar productivity across their different departments.

1. Engagement and Interaction:

- a) First-year students expressed mixed opinions on seminar productivity, with some mentioning disengaging readings and unhelpful seminars, while others found engaging activities and a sense of community.
- b) Second-year students generally acknowledged the potential for productive discussions in seminars but raised concerns about the lack of community, fear of looking unintelligent, and unstructured sessions.
- c) Third-year students emphasised the importance of testing ideas, productive discussions, correlation between seminars and assessed work, and varied activities within the seminars. They also highlighted the need for more focused preparation and the value of involving all participants.

2. Tutor Effectiveness:

- a) First-year students mentioned the importance of an engaged seminar tutor who provides further notes and clarification on course content.
- b) Second-year students emphasised the influence of the seminar tutor on seminar productivity, with varying experiences depending on the tutor's engagement and the structure they implemented.
- c) Third-year students highlighted the impact of a well-structured seminar and identified effective facilitated learning through techniques such as highlighting key passages, pre-prepared questions.

3. Community and Sense of Belonging:

- a) First-year students appreciated seminars for creating a sense of community and reducing the feeling of studying alone. Although identify that more can be done by tutors to foster the community.
- b) Second-year students expressed a lack of community in seminars, making it difficult to explore ideas and relate texts to their life experiences. Some identify not knowing their peers names weeks into the module being taught.
- c) Third-year students did not specifically mention the sense of community but focused more on productive discussions and involving all participants.

4. Preparation and Workload:

- a) First-year students felt that seminars sometimes did not help them learn new things, with lectures being more effective in that regard.
- b) Second-year students recognized their responsibility in preparing for seminars and acknowledged that their productivity depended on their personal study habits.

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- c) Third-year students suggested the need for more focused preparation, varying activities, and addressing excessive reading requirements to enhance seminar productivity.

5. Seminar Structure:

- a) First-year students mentioned the seating arrangement and comfort level as factors influencing engagement in seminars.
- b) Second-year students highlighted the varying structures of seminars, ranging from tutor-led discussions to unstructured sessions with long stretches of silence.
- c) Third-year students emphasised the importance of seminar structure, suggesting that longer seminars with fewer participants and guided questions could enhance productivity.