

## Issues

History seminars are usually composed of a group of students who meet with their tutor to discuss issues and problems in their subject. The numbers in seminar groups can vary greatly, but are usually between 10 and 25. They differ from tutorials which are usually smaller in size and generally focus upon problems and study skills, like essay writing. Sometimes though the two terms are, confusingly, used interchangeably.

In History, seminar discussion is rightly regarded by both tutors and students as critical to effective learning and the development of both subject understanding and transferable skills. Seminars enable students to test, clarify, refine and develop their skills and understanding of the subject. Indeed, they can provide a means of developing a wider range of skills than perhaps any other form of teaching. They are therefore an ideal means of encouraging deep, active approaches to the subject.

With increasing student numbers, diversity of entrants and modular degree programmes, deciding how seminars can and should be used is therefore an important and increasingly challenging issue. It is also the subject of much research on student learning, and of a great deal of discussion among History tutors. Most would agree though that there is a real need to encourage greater student motivation and participation, in order to produce the critical understanding and skills valued in the subject.

## Some Questions

- For what purposes do you use seminars on the modules on which you teach?
- What do you think are the key skills in seminar teaching?
- What skills do you want students to develop through them?
- How do you start the first seminar with a group of new students?
- How do you encourage your students to participate actively?
- Have you recently introduced any new methods into your seminar teaching?
- How effective are your seminars? And how do you know?

## Further Reading

- S Griffiths & P Partington, *Enabling Active Learning in Small Groups* (Sheffield, CVCP/USDTU, 1992)
- D Jacques, *Learning in Groups* (London, Kogan Page, 1991)
- G Gibbs, *Discussion with more Students* (Oxford PCFC, 1992)
- G Gibbs, S & T Habeshaw, *53 Interesting Things to do in your Seminars and Tutorials* (Bristol, Technical & Educational Services, 1986)
- G Brown & M Atkins, *Effective Teaching in Higher Education* (London, Routledge, 1988)
- D Bligh (ed), *Teach Thinking by Discussion* (Surrey, SRHE, 1986)
- A Booth & P Hyland (eds), *History in Higher Education: New Directions in Teaching and Learning* (London, Blackwell, 1996)

## **Educational Aims of Seminar Work**

All the current research on student learning emphasises the importance of small group discussion in developing students' understanding. Unlike lectures it can provide a secure framework, an immediate and supportive audience and overall it encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning which is one of the key hallmarks of a deep, active approach. It encourages students to:

- offer their ideas, opinions and anecdotes for appraisal and acceptance
- clarify, extend and develop their statements to meet and satisfy the criticism and questioning of their peers
- develop their language skills to ensure effective communication of their ideas
- be willing to challenge the views of others and to accept challenge to their own views
- develop the ability to compromise and to form consensus of opinion
- work together to analyse a problem or issue

Seminar teaching can develop a wider range of skills than perhaps any other single method of teaching including:

**Analytical Skills** – Critical thinking and interpretation; synthesis and identification of key ideas through exposure to a variety of views, ideas and problems presented by peers and tutors

**Organisational Skills** – Preparing evidence or a case for discussion; leading a group of students in discussion

**Communication Skills** – Participation in discussion, preparation of debates, role play etc., or presenting a case to other students and listening, questioning and responding.

**Collaborative Skills** – Working together and negotiating with others