

# 1 The Fundamentals of Facilitating

Student-centered discussions are conversations in which students wrestle with ideas and engage open-ended questions together through dialogue. The teacher acts as a facilitator, or guide, for the conversation, and students talk with each other rather than respond to the teacher. In this book, we focus on text-based discussions, where the conversation is grounded in some kind of rich text, which could be anything from a poem to a painting to a math problem. This chapter describes the fundamental components of student-centered, text-based discussions, and it is divided into four sections:

1. Why have student-centered discussions?
2. Essential ingredients of a discussion
3. The architecture of a discussion
4. Frequently asked questions and tips for beginners

This chapter is designed for readers who are relatively new to leading student-centered discussions and for readers who have led such discussions by instinct but have not really thought about how they do so.

## WHY HAVE STUDENT-CENTERED DISCUSSIONS?

Broadly speaking, student-centered discussions help students develop intellectually and socially.<sup>1</sup> Through close examination and discussion of texts,

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students develop the skills and habits of reading analytically, listening carefully, citing evidence, disagreeing respectfully, and being open-minded. These skills are reflected in state and local standards related to oral language, discussion, reasoning, critical thinking, and reading. Increasingly, these skills are in demand both in the workforce and on state tests, which often include open-response questions. Ultimately, these skills are also demanded by our democracy, which relies on civil discourse and thoughtful exchange of ideas. In student-centered discussions, students will say things neither you nor anyone else in the room has thought about before, and students who struggle in written tasks may shine brilliantly in conversation. When all goes well, these discussions are fun in the energizing, mind-bending way of the best learning experiences.

The roots of this type of inquiry lie with the first human to ask an open-ended question about some abstraction. For example: “Hey Og, why do you think it is dark sometimes and light sometimes?” In recorded history, the basis for student-centered discussion lies in Plato’s dialogues, each of which recounts a conversation about an idea or set of ideas. In most of these dialogues, the person of Socrates drives the conversation by asking questions of others. The key element of this type of inquiry is that the questioner does not give birth to the idea; rather, he or she helps others form these ideas. For this reason, Mortimer Adler (1982) contended that facilitation of discussions is akin to midwifery, helping others give birth.

The student-centered dialogue we focus on in this book is not typical in most classrooms. In most classrooms, discussion is teacher centered. In teacher-centered discussions, the teacher controls the content in an effort to cover the curriculum, or for the purposes of teaching (Barnes, 1969). Research over the last 30 years has consistently reported that the forms of teacher-centered classroom discussion are either: cases in which the teacher initiates the discussion, students respond, and the teacher then evaluates; or cases in which the teacher initiates, students respond, and then teacher gives feedback (Cazden, 1988; Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). In both of these instances, students are mere respondents. There are certainly good pedagogical reasons for a teacher to have teacher-centered discussions in the classroom—for example, to address narrow and specific content goals or to check for understanding of previously covered content. However, when the goals for a discussion are (1) for students to deepen their understanding of ideas in a text, as well as their own ideas and the ideas of others, and (2) to develop students’ ability to engage in a civil, intellectually challenging discussion of ideas, then a student-centered discussion is a more effective means to do so.

## ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS OF A STUDENT-CENTERED, TEXT-BASED DISCUSSION, AKA *SEMINAR*

Student-centered, text-based discussions are often called *seminars* or *Socratic seminars*.<sup>2</sup> Because our own experience draws heavily on the National Paideia Center's work with *seminars*, and because "student-centered, text-based discussion" is quite cumbersome to repeat throughout this book, we will use the term *seminar* to represent a student-centered, text-based discussion. We intentionally avoid more ambiguous language, for example, *discussion*, which could refer to teacher-centered or student-centered talk and might or might not include a text.

There are four essential ingredients to a seminar:

1. Text
2. Questions
3. Participants
4. Facilitator

### Text

The first critical element of a seminar is the text. Although many valuable kinds of conversations don't revolve around a text, we focus here on conversations that do. Using a text anchors the discussion, improves students' reading and interpreting skills, and gives students the opportunity to engage deeply with important texts across disciplines. Our students often asked us whether we could have a seminar on an issue that mattered deeply to them—prejudice, justice, uniforms—to which we replied, "Sure, if you can find a text about it. Otherwise, we can discuss it in another way."

The basic definition of a high-quality text is that it is rich, it is primary, and it addresses ideas worthy of discussion. Seminar texts can be drawn from a variety of print and nonprint genres, including poems, historical documents, short stories, essays, paintings, maps, and music.

The National Paideia Center (2002) defines the characteristics of a seminar text as including:

- a collection of ideas and values
- an appropriate level of challenge and complexity for the intended participants
- relevance to both the participants and to the curricular objectives
- an appropriate degree of ambiguity.

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<i>Seminar Text Rubric</i>			
<i>Criteria</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>
<b>Ideas and Values</b>	Addresses multiple ideas and values	Addresses some ideas and values	Addresses an idea or value
<b>Degree of Challenge</b>	Few participants comprehend without assistance	Some participants comprehend without assistance	All participants comprehend without assistance
<b>Curricular Relevance</b>	Clearly related to the curriculum	Somewhat related to the curriculum	Limited in relation to the curriculum
<b>Ambiguity</b>	Is open to a wide variety of interpretations	Is open to some variety of interpretations	Is open to few interpretations

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The Paideia Seminar Text Rubric (National Paideia Center, 2002) is a useful tool for assessing whether a potential text is a good candidate for a seminar.

If a text scores mostly 3s with an occasional 2, you can consider it a good possibility. A 1 in any category is a warning sign, and a 1 in ambiguity is likely a fatal flaw because it means there is probably little to discuss. A 1 in curricular relevance, on the other hand, although less than ideal, is less crucial because even if the text is detached from what students are studying, they may be able to dig into it if the text is ambiguous, challenging, and full of ideas and values. Similarly, a 1 in degree of challenge can be OK, particularly when students are first learning how to do seminars, but seminars also offer the opportunity to tackle more difficult texts together than students might try on their own.

The first seminar Liz participated in was about the Pledge of Allegiance, a text both she and Mike have since used many times. On the Seminar Text Rubric, we would score the Pledge of Allegiance:

- 3 in Ideas and Values (liberty, justice, nation, government, allegiance, etc.)
- 1 or 2 in Degree of Challenge, depending on the participants (many students do not understand all the words in the Pledge)
- Anywhere from a 1 to 3 in Curricular Relevance, depending on the context in which it is used, but very often a 3 if used in conjunction with study of citizenship and government or as a reflection on something said daily in many schools
- 3 in Ambiguity because there are several potential interpretations of many of the words in the Pledge

We have seen teachers attempt to use excerpts from textbooks, as well as newspaper and magazine articles as texts; none of these works well in a seminar because they are not ambiguous enough. They may all be very useful texts for students to read, but they do not provide fertile ground for open-ended dialogue in a seminar context. We find it useful to think of seminar texts as classic texts. By *classic*, we mean that the texts are the sort that have endured, or will endure, because they're about the things that humans struggle with across time and cultures, like good and evil, life and death, war and peace, love, faith, betrayal, equality, honor, nature, power, and tragedy.

Finding an appropriate text is often one of the most difficult challenges for inexperienced seminar leaders. You will discover, however, that once you start looking, you will see potential texts in many places. Two resources for high-quality texts that we have found particularly helpful are:

1. The National Paideia Center ([www.paideia.org](http://www.paideia.org)), which includes sample seminar plans and the Jack and Mary McCall Library, a digital collection of texts organized by ideas, subject, and type.
2. The Touchstones Discussions Project ([www.touchstones.org](http://www.touchstones.org)), which offers collections of texts for a variety of grade levels and content areas.

## Questions

The next critical component of a seminar is questions. Once you have selected a text, you prepare questions to facilitate a discussion of the ideas in the text. Although you will invariably think of new questions as you listen to participants, and you will probably not ask all the questions on your list, it's important to plan for a seminar to help participants gain a deeper understanding of the text.

The most important criterion for questions is that they be open-ended. In other words, the questions should have more than one possible answer. A seminar is not the time to check for basic comprehension about what happened in the text or to make sure that students are clear on essential facts—you will do that before the seminar, as we will describe in the Architecture of a Seminar section of this chapter. Sometimes, questions might sound to students like there's one answer—for example “What's the difference between *liberty* and *freedom*?” (a question you might ask about the Pledge of Allegiance), but what you want to know is students' interpretation. In that case, you can signal that you're asking a more open-ended question by saying something like “What do *you think* the difference is between *liberty* and *freedom*?”

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Questions should also be thought-provoking, meaning that students can't necessarily answer quickly and might need to return to the text and think further before responding. Finally, questions should be clear, which means that students should understand what you're asking. Often, you won't know how clear a question is until you ask it in the seminar and see the looks of understanding or puzzlement on students' faces, but a good rule of thumb is that questions should be stated as simply and succinctly as possible.

### Participants

Another essential ingredient to a seminar, of course, is the participants. Seminars are appropriate for people of all ages, from kindergartners to adults. The texts, questions, and conversations will be different for different age groups and content areas, but everyone can be a participant. Although seminars develop and demand higher-order thinking skills, they are not for advanced students only. In fact, teachers are often surprised to see that their best seminar participants may be not the advanced students (some of whom are less willing to take an intellectual risk in front of their peers) but the students who might struggle with other parts of the curriculum due to their reading level or learning disability or English language proficiency. Often, these students are creative thinkers who thrive in a seminar environment where oral communication and ideas are valued.

Participants have three main tasks in any seminar:

1. Prepare
2. Participate  
Listen, think, speak, refer to text
3. Respect

Before a seminar, students should have done whatever task you've requested of them (read the text, annotate it, define unknown words, etc.), and they should have the text with them. During the seminar, students should participate, which they can do by listening to the conversation, thinking, offering comments and questions, and referring to the text. Students should also respect their classmates and the text, which they can demonstrate by using each others' names, building on others' comments, and critiquing ideas rather than people. Many teachers who do seminars regularly keep some version of the above guidelines for participation posted in their classroom.

*Note about other participants:* Seminars are not just for students! Seminars with faculty members and with families can be wonderful ways to discuss important ideas, rejuvenate intellectual energy, and come together as a community. In the first community seminar that we held at our school in North Carolina, parents, grandparents, students, and faculty broke into groups to have seminars on the same text, a selection from Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*. Many of the parents and grandparents were a bit tentative and waited for the faculty facilitators to tell them how to interpret the text (as their teachers had always done), but the students plunged right in and led the way in a great conversation, much to the amazement and delight of their adult family members.

## Facilitator

The final essential ingredient is you, the facilitator. Like the participants, you have several tasks in a seminar:

1. Prepare
2. Participate  
Listen, think, question
3. Maintain safe and respectful environment

You prepare for a seminar by selecting a text, writing questions, and planning what students need to do before and after a seminar to get them ready for the conversation and to follow up on the conversation (see the next section of this chapter for more on the before- and after-seminar components). During the seminar, you spend most of your time listening, thinking, and keeping track of the conversation by taking notes (also called *mapping* a seminar; see the final section of the book for a full explanation). You ask some questions, based on what you prepared and what students are discussing. You do not make statements—it's not your job to share your opinion or ideas, even though it can be tempting in some conversations. Your voice should not be the most frequently heard voice in the room, and this can take some getting used to, both for you and your students. Remember, you're trying to help students birth their ideas and dig deeply into the text.

Your most important task is to maintain a safe and respectful environment. The seminar must be a place where students can risk their ideas without fear of being laughed at, where all ideas are listened to, and where people are not interrupted or ignored. Remember that part of the goal of a seminar is to help students develop social skills, which, like all skills, need practice

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and frequent reminders as they develop. If you do not maintain a respectful environment, you will likely not have rich seminars because students either won't talk or won't share anything very interesting. The next chapter and the final chapter of this book address this topic of safety in more detail, including strategies for developing a respectful environment for a seminar.

### THE ARCHITECTURE OF A SEMINAR

While a seminar may appear to the casual observer to be a free-wheeling discussion, the best seminars have a structure that supports open-ended inquiry. This structure includes pre-seminar, which prepares participants for the seminar; the seminar itself, within which there are different types of questions to guide the conversation; and post-seminar, which offers opportunities for application and extension of the ideas emerging from the seminar.

This architecture for a seminar is reflected in the Seminar Planning Form (see Resource B for a reproducible copy). The example Planning Form that follows was designed to be used with the Pledge of Allegiance in a sixth-grade classroom.

At the foundation of this structure are assumptions central to consistent success in helping students gain a deeper understanding of the text, themselves, and each other through the seminar:

- All students can and should learn to wrestle with big ideas.
- Students are capable of creating meaningful conversations about the ideas in a text.
- Students will respect each other and participate if given appropriate coaching and time.
- Students need to grapple with challenging ideas and texts.

There is value in developing listening and speaking skills. We become more literate not only by reading a book or using a pen, but also by talking to each other in situations where we can internalize and share what we read or write.

That said, the structure of the seminar is robust enough to provide a fertile ground for having rich conversations even if not all the assumptions are met in a classroom; however, success is less likely when the above conditions are not met.

#### Pre-Seminar

Pre-seminar activities connect the seminar to the other work of the class and help participants prepare for conversation through content and process

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## Seminar Planning Form

Text: The Pledge of Allegiance

Class: 6th Grade Social Studies

### Pre-Seminar

*Content*—Present relevant background information. Prepare participants to discuss selected text.

Before handing students a copy of the text, have them write down the Pledge from memory. Once they have done so, hand out copies of the Pledge and have students circle the words they don't know and define them. Lastly, have at least two students read the Pledge aloud.

*Process*—Review seminar objectives and guidelines. Prepare participants to participate in seminar discussion, and set goal[s].

Students should look in their seminar folders to review their reflection from their last seminar and determine an individual participation goal. As a group, we will review briefly the last few seminars and develop a group goal.

### Seminar Questions

*Opening*—Identify main ideas from the text.

Which word do you think is most important in the Pledge of Allegiance?

*Core*—Focus/analyze textual details.

- Why do you think the Pledge starts with the flag and not the “republic for which it stands”?
- The Pledge was changed in 1924. It used to say “my flag” instead of “the flag.” Do you think this changes the meaning? If so, how?
- What do you think the phrase “one nation under God” means? The words “under God” were added in 1954. [Read Pledge aloud without the words “under God.”] Do you think the Pledge has a different meaning without those words?

*Closing*—Personalize and apply the textual ideas.

What changes, if any, do you think should be made to the Pledge?

### Post-Seminar

*Process*—Assess individual and group participation using the Fulcrum-Based Seminar Rubric (see Resource B) with students referring to recent past as well as future seminar discussion.

*Content*—Extend application of textual and discussion ideas; continuation of pre-seminar.

Students have a choice of activities:

- (1) Write your own pledge to something that's important to you.
- (2) Write a persuasive essay about whether the Pledge should be said in school.
- (3) Revise the Pledge and explain why you chose your revisions.

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activities. Content activities prepare students for beginning to understand the ideas in the text. For a written text, pre-seminar content work could mean simply reading and rereading the text, or engaging in any activity that helps students master a literal interpretation of the text. In addition to comprehension, pre-seminar content work should include whatever context or background knowledge students need for the discussion. The extent of pre-seminar activities depends in part on where the seminar fits in your curriculum. If, for example, you are using a seminar to introduce a new unit and to generate questions for further study, you might do minimal pre-seminar activity beyond reading the text. If, however, the seminar is a culmination of a unit of study, the whole unit may serve as pre-seminar content development. Similarly, the extent of comprehension work you do with a text depends on both the text and the skill levels of your students. Texts like the Pledge of Allegiance or Escher prints might require minimal preparation, whereas the Gettysburg Address, a Shakespearean text, or an excerpt from Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* might require more time and support to establish basic comprehension. Without adequate preparation, the most a seminar can be is a very good bull session.

Pre-seminar process activities help students and the facilitator prepare for having a student-centered discussion. While pre-seminar *content* activities can vary in length and depth, pre-seminar *process* activities are quick and happen right before you begin the seminar. The pre-seminar process includes a review of the roles of participants and the facilitator (see above).

During the pre-seminar process, students also set specific process goals. These goals may be for the group—for example, “We need to work on building on the ideas of others”—or individual, for example, “I need to ask more questions.” Participating in a seminar is a process with which many students are not familiar, and the social component of a seminar is critical to success, both as an objective in itself and as support for the intellectual component of the seminar. As a result, working on process skills should be an explicit part of a seminar. See the strategy of Reflection in Chapter 7 and the strategy of Pre-Seminar in the Challenge Issues: Rosetta Stone section of Chapter 8 for more details on pre-seminar content and process activities.

### **Seminar**

The seminar itself consists of three phases: opening, core, and closing; each uses a slightly different type of open-ended question. The opening question is designed to help participants identify main ideas from the text. Generally, the opening question sends participants to the text for an answer, and it is a question that all participants can answer. For example,

an opening question for a seminar on the Pledge of Allegiance might be, “Which word do you think is most important in the Pledge of Allegiance?” Examples for other texts include, “What do you think a good title for this text would be?” or “Which line is most striking to you in this text?” The opening question is broad, with multiple possible answers, and provides an entry point into the text and the conversation for participants. Many facilitators do the opening question round-robin style, where every student provides an answer to the question before the facilitator opens it up for students to explain why they chose a particular answer. The round-robin is a helpful strategy for beginners but is less necessary once participants are more accustomed to the seminar process.

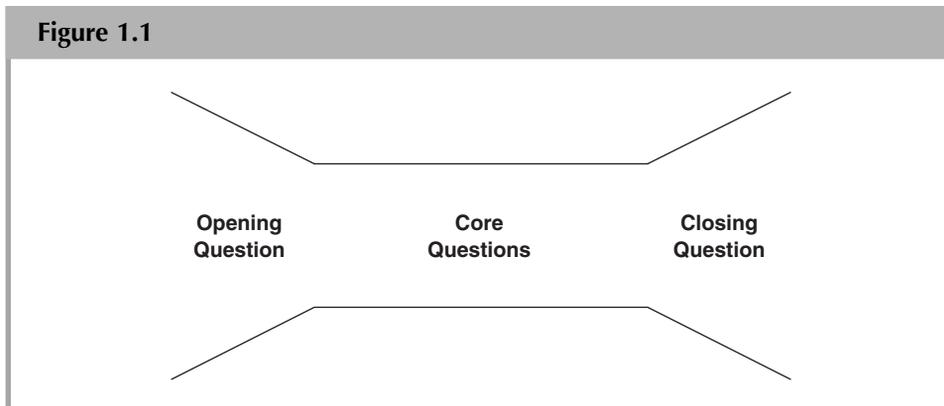
Core questions occur during the bulk of the conversation. They focus on particular aspects of the text and are designed to help participants dig deeply into the text. Sample core questions for the Pledge of Allegiance include, “Why do you think the Pledge starts with the flag and not the ‘republic for which it stands?’” We usually plan at least three to five core questions in advance, knowing that the ones we ask will depend on what students are discussing and that we will probably think of at least one or two new questions during the seminar based on the conversation. During a seminar, you also ask follow-up questions as part of the core to probe for deeper understanding and to keep students focused on the text. Follow-up questions include: “What do you mean by \_\_\_\_\_?” “How does that statement connect to the text?” “Where else in the text do you see something that speaks to that?” “Do you agree with \_\_\_\_\_?”

The closing question helps students apply the text to their own lives. Although students may be tempted to come out of the text and make these connections earlier in the seminar, the core questions try to keep the conversation focused on the text. The closing question is the opportunity for students to personalize the text. A closing question for the Pledge of Allegiance might be: “What changes, if any, do you think should be made to the Pledge?” We plan a closing question in advance of the seminar, but sometimes, we change the question based on the conversation. Like the opening question, the closing question is broad and has many possible answers—at least as many answers as students. This format of broad-narrow-broad questions is reflected in Figure 1.1.

## Post-Seminar

Following a seminar, the learning that has taken place during the seminar should be extended through various activities. As with pre-seminar activities, post-seminar activities include both process and content. To address process, directly after the seminar, the facilitator asks students to

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revisit the individual goal each of them set at the beginning of the seminar and reflect on how they did in meeting that goal. Then, the facilitator leads a group debriefing of the seminar, asking students to reflect on what the group did well and what the group could work on in their next seminar. This attention to the social component of the seminar process is critical to students' ongoing improvement of their seminar skills, which in turn enables them to participate better socially and intellectually in future seminars. It can be tempting to skip this part and leave a few more minutes for seminar discussion, but we find that the trade-off is rarely worth it.

To address content, the facilitator provides students with follow-up activities that help them extend and bring what they learned from the seminar back to their other learning. Often, post-seminar activities include writing assignments that follow directly from the seminar; other possibilities include creating artwork or role-plays based on students' interpretation and application of the ideas from the seminar. Post-seminar activity offers a good opportunity for both the facilitator and students to assess the students' thinking from a seminar. A post-seminar content activity for the Pledge of Allegiance might ask students to do one of the following: (1) write their own pledge to something that's important to them, (2) write a persuasive essay about whether the words "under God" should be included in the Pledge today (perhaps after giving students the historical context in which those words were added) or (3) revise the Pledge and explain why they chose their revisions.

A complete seminar plan includes pre-seminar, seminar, and post-seminar, as seen in the sample plan above. Additional sample plans are available at the National Paideia Center Website ([www.paideia.org](http://www.paideia.org)) and in the Center's *Seminar Sampler*, which also includes several examples of pre-seminar and post-seminar activities.

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### Basic Seminar Checklist

- The text chosen is appropriate for a seminar (see Seminar Text Rubric) and the development of the students.
  - Prepared questions are open-ended (not leading) and designed to elicit higher-order thinking about the ideas in the text.
  - The seminar plan includes pre- and post-seminar activities (see Seminar Planning Form).
  - Students have all read the text and established a basic comprehension.
  - The room is set up to allow all participants to make eye contact with each other (e.g., circle or square).
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This checklist can be used to ensure that the fundamental aspects of the seminar have been addressed prior to beginning the discussion.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS AND TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

### Frequently Asked Questions

*What does a seminar look like?* Participants sit so they can all make eye contact with each other, in a circle or square, depending on what's possible in the room. The facilitator is part of the circle. There is no hand raising or being called on. Participants have a copy of the text in front of them. Most of the talk comes from participants, with the facilitator asking questions occasionally. Sometimes, there is silence as participants and the facilitator think.

*How long does a seminar take?* The length of a seminar will vary somewhat based on the age of students (shorter seminars for younger students) and the text, but a rule of thumb is about 45 minutes to an hour for the discussion. The length of pre-seminar and post-seminar activities will depend on what's appropriate for the text you've chosen, your students, and your curriculum. Some pre-seminar and post-seminar activities may be short enough to occur within the same class period as the discussion, some may be done as homework before and after the seminar, and others may require lengthier, in-class time.

*For what subjects and grade levels is the seminar format appropriate?* As we noted earlier in this chapter, a seminar is appropriate for all grade levels. Seminars for elementary students tend to be 20 to 45 minutes in length and spend more time focused on the social elements of the seminar process, particularly in the early grades. Seminars can be done in all subjects, including English/language arts, math, social studies, science, foreign language, art, music, and physical education. Sometimes, seminars happen outside of content areas, where everyone in a team, grade level, or sometimes the whole

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school engages in seminars about the same text. Schoolwide seminars can be particularly powerful for generating a conversation about common texts and ideas.

*How many people can participate in the same seminar?* The short answer is that you can make a seminar work for almost any size class or group that you have. The longer answer is that you want enough people to have a range of ideas for the conversation, but not so many people that participants can't find enough space in the conversation to contribute their ideas. In our experience, the balance of those two considerations usually falls between 15 and 35 participants, but good seminars are possible outside of that range. If you have more than 35 participants, you might try having some participants outside the seminar circle as process observers (see Fishbowl strategy in Chapter 7 of this book for an example of this). We've also seen teachers with very large classes have a seminar with half the class while the other half of the class works independently. If you have the luxury of space and another facilitator, you might also split the group into two groups and have separate seminars using the same text.

*How often should I do a seminar?* You need to do a seminar often enough for both you and students to practice. As with any other set of skills or classroom activity, especially when you are all first learning it, it's important to practice frequently so that everyone learns the routine and how to do it well. Initially, that frequency can translate into weekly seminars. Beyond that, the answer to this question depends on your goals and your curriculum. Some teachers we know do weekly seminars; others do them biweekly, once a month, or even once a quarter. We tend to see seminars more frequently in social studies and English language-arts classes, in part because it's easier to find high-quality texts for those subjects, but we know plenty of math and science teachers who use seminars regularly in their classrooms. A companion question that we often hear is "How do I fit seminars into all the other things I've got to do?" The underlying concern here is that seminars take too much time away from an otherwise jammed list of things to cover. The important thing to consider is that seminar isn't an add-on to those other things—it should be part of the curriculum and should be helping you reach your objectives.

*A seminar is so open ended. Is any answer "right"?* Although a seminar is open ended, that doesn't mean anything people say in a seminar is "right." Sometimes, students will say things that are factually incorrect, like "Well, back in the day when Thomas Jefferson wrote the Pledge of Allegiance, it was OK to use the phrase 'under God,' so I think we have to look at it from that historical perspective." Often, another student will correct that kind of wrong answer, but if the answer goes uncorrected, it's up to you to decide whether correcting it during the seminar is important for students' understanding of the text. In this case, you would probably clarify that Thomas

Jefferson didn't write the Pledge, ask if anyone knows when it was written, and then ask a question about how that historical perspective affects the way students think about the Pledge. If the error is less critical to the conversation, you might not interrupt the seminar to correct but wait until after the seminar to clarify it. The other kind of "not right" answer is the kind that is unsupported by the text. This is not very likely to happen with the Pledge of Allegiance, but it crops up in discussions of other texts, where a student might say something like, "That character is crazy" or "The author doesn't like poor people," either of which could be a defensible inference to draw from a text but could also be a statement that a student can't find support for in the text at all. If it looks to you like students are giving this sort of a response, simply ask them what in the text supports their statement.

### Tips for Beginners

If you are new to seminar facilitation, or if your students are new to the process, here are a few things to keep in mind:

*Start small.* In the beginning, keep seminars short in length (10 minutes for young students; 20 minutes for older students)—better for the seminar to end with students wanting to talk more than to end in prolonged silence. Also, use seminar texts that are short and not too demanding in terms of reading comprehension (e.g., the Pledge of Allegiance). You don't want to overwhelm students in the beginning. Build up to longer seminars and more challenging texts.

*Focus on the social parts of the seminar first.* Yes, we know you want to have sophisticated conversations about difficult texts with your students. However, most students aren't used to being asked for their opinion without ongoing feedback and commentary from a teacher, and they're not necessarily used to having intellectual conversations with their peers. They have to learn how to do those things. It's OK if the first few seminars are not the most intellectual conversations, focusing more on students learning how to do a seminar, how not to interrupt each other, how to refer to a text, how to disagree, and so on. The intellectual parts will come, once you have established the social parts of a seminar.

*Use different kinds of text.* Use a variety of texts, including both print and nonprint texts. You'll find that individual students respond differently to texts.

*Plan with someone else.* Writing good questions and thinking of good pre- and post-seminar activities is almost always easier with someone else, so see if you can enlist a colleague to plan with you.

*Be careful about how many seminars you do in a day.* If you see multiple groups of students in a day, you might be tempted to do a seminar with each group on the same day. Be warned that seminars are exhausting—even

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though you don't talk much as a facilitator, you're concentrating so hard during the seminar that the process is surprisingly tiring. We occasionally have done five seminars in a day, but we could barely talk or think at the end (much less be great facilitators for that fifth seminar).

*Don't get discouraged.* Sometimes, seminars flop (even for us, and we've done zillions of them). And sometimes, it can take a long time for students to develop the social and intellectual skills needed for successful seminars—all the more reason to keep trying seminars because students clearly need work in that area. Trust that the process will work for you and your students. The rest of this book is designed to help you think about what's happening in a seminar and how to respond as a facilitator. You will eventually have seminars that soar and reaffirm why you are a teacher.

The fundamental skills outlined in this chapter—selecting texts, asking questions, and designing pre- and post-seminar activities—form the blueprint for a successful seminar. They are, in a sense, the science of creating a collaborative, intellectual dialogue in the classroom. However, as anyone who has tried such dialogue can attest, mastering these skills does not guarantee a successful seminar. To probe more deeply into the art and magic of seminar facilitation, we turn our attention to the multiple decisions a facilitator makes during a seminar.

*Note to beginners:* You may want to have a few seminars before reading the next chapter.

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## NOTES

1. We are deeply indebted to the National Paideia Center, with whom we have learned much about facilitating student-centered, text-based discussions, which the National Paideia Center refers to as *seminars*. We draw on the center's work heavily throughout this chapter. Readers interested in more detail than we provide here will find useful resources on the center's Website, [www.paideia.org](http://www.paideia.org)
2. A simple Google search of *Socratic seminar* yields more than 20,000 hits.