

Module #5

Group Dynamics, Norms, and Structure Behind the scenes and below the surface



The aim of this module is to help you:

- Understand, and therefore enjoy, those parts of group life that are often thought of as tough and challenging
- Develop tools and techniques for leading a seminar, and gain new perspectives on group life

A well-known story from the classroom...

John has just answered a question for the third time today. While you are relieved that there is at least one student you can rely on to keep the seminar going, you are also aware that John is answering too often and too quickly and in a way that might be silencing other members of the group. For example, Chris has hardly said a word the entire semester. You know he has a lot to offer, based on his written assignments, but he seems to clam up in class. Also, you have noticed that Carol has gone quiet in recent classes. At the beginning of the semester, she made a significant contribution, but she no longer seems motivated to participate. You suspect that it might have something to do with John...

Overview of this Module

This module explores the topic of group dynamics, norms, and structure. First, we look at the topic in general terms, highlighting the difference between the seminar and the traditional lecture class. Then we shift to practical implications for the seminar leader seeking to create a positive environment (“creating the structure and norms”) and facilitate the seminar. Finally, in the section titled “When things get personal,” we suggest ways to respond when deeply personal issues or experiences arise in class.

Group Dynamics: An Introduction

The SAGES seminar is different from a lecture class—not just with respect to physical setting and delivery of the content, but also with respect to the seminar leader’s approach.

Since the learning in a seminar emerges through group dialogue, and not in a linear fashion, it is helpful when instructors facilitate the dialogue in a way that encourages all students to participate. To do this effectively, however, instructors must be aware of, and know how to influence, the group dynamic at work in a given seminar. Inevitably, some people will speak more often, some less frequently, some more forcefully, while others will be hesitant.

Thus, the seminar poses specific challenges for the instructor, requiring perhaps a different approach, and even different tools and techniques. This module will assist you in meeting these challenges.

Beginning with Yourself

As we have seen in other modules, your approach to seminar instruction will depend in part on your own habits and preferences. As you think about facilitating a seminar, then, it is useful to start with yourself—to ask how you respond to group environments where discussion is less structured and more dynamic.

The more you are aware of your own behaviors and tendencies, the more effective you will be as a seminar leader. Ask yourself:

Do I tend to jump in to save people by providing the answers? Does it often seem simpler and quicker to provide answers than to ask further questions? Do I encourage alternative views and potentially tangential remarks?

“I noticed that students were coming in and talking and sharing their experiences with each other. So I decided to come in and participate with them and let them go for a little bit, and then start the class. So, instead of saying, “This class is only about ...” I let the class be about the sharing of information, the sharing of feelings and anxiety, because the students can be very helpful to each other. So, rather than just being an academic professor whose primary role is to socialize them into the university, I realized that I am also a parent in a way.”

~SAGES Instructor

Creating Appropriate Structure

Since the seminar is less structured than a lecture class, students may experience high levels of anxiety and frustration, particularly in a seminar's early stages. While unstructured learning situations offer great opportunities for the students to learn to deal with complexity and ambiguity, we also know that too much anxiety hampers learning. One of your roles, therefore, is to provide a seminar environment in which students feel safe and eager to participate and this requires a certain degree of structure.

What is a Seminar Structure?

“Structure” refers to the boundaries within which seminar activities and interactions take place. For example, you can decide to have the students keep a journal every week, or you can have them exchange thoughts with each other, and with you, by using Blackboard. You can ask one student to lead the discussion by raising a “cosmic question” that emerged during a particular reading assignment, or you can initiate discussion with questions of your own.

In this sense, there is no one **TRUE** way to structure a seminar. Given your natural style and preferences, what works for others may not work for you. But no matter how you decide to run your seminar, it is helpful to ask yourself;

What kind of seminar environment will help accomplish my objectives and meet my students' needs?

Ideally, a seminar structure will be loose enough to accommodate everyone's needs, yet tight enough to accomplish the learning goals of value to every participant in the seminar. In surveys and interviews conducted by the Learning Research Team during the SAGES pilot, students reported high levels of satisfaction and engagement in those seminars where an explicit structure was in place: a clear syllabus, clear assignments, an articulated learning purpose, or specific ground rules. Furthermore, instructors in these seminars treated the structure as a reference point, a way to bring the participants in, rather than as a rigid set of procedures from which no one could deviate.



SPECIAL TOOLBOX:

Tips from Fellow Instructors

The following offers practical tips drawn from exemplary seminar practices identified during the SAGES pilot.

1. Establishing norms

“Norms” refers to those behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that become “normal” or accepted in the seminar. As the seminar leader, you have an opportunity to influence the norms of your class in ways that promote an optimal learning experience for you and for your students. Work together with your students to create ground rules for the seminar. Articulate how important it is for everyone to be accountable to the rules if true learning is to occur.

Ground Rules

1. Listen with an open mind
2. Respect everyone's ideas
3. Come to class prepared
4. Make an effort to turn in assignments on time
5. Handle disagreements in a respectful way

2. Sharing the spotlight

In the early stage of the seminar, when students' seminar skills are yet to be developed, they will naturally look to you for guidance and direction. In order to help students acquire advanced seminar skills, invite them to gradually assume responsibility for creating a seminar space beneficial to all seminar participants.

You can clearly outline the expectations for the course explaining the “WHAT” in terms of the seminar's objectives, but leaving the “HOW” for the students to determine. For example, you may ask for their input in selecting classroom readings and assignments.

“Early in the semester, I noticed that the conversation always kept coming back to me. Students would often talk to me, but rarely addressed one another. I was becoming the center of the conversation. I realized that I needed to do something to divert the attention from me and have them engage with one another. Whenever a student asked me a question, I tried first to address the same question to the group: “That is an interesting question. What do you all think?” They gradually came to understand that I was not there to provide answers to all the questions; they needed to work together to come up with an answer.”

~SAGES Instructor

“Students were empowered to make decisions. The instructors treated us as equals and I think the mutual respect really helped us open up, be able to express our views and learn from each other.”

~ SAGES student

3. Modeling desirable seminar behavior

Students are very tuned into the way you ask questions, encourage debate, explain the “rules of the game,” deal with latecomers to class, etc. Your behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs will flow into their own interactions. As the seminar leader, you improve the likelihood of a meaningful exchange of ideas by modeling what constitutes thoughtful and productive dialogue.

“The instructor and the writing instructor created an open space for conversations by creating a forum, where any opinion could be explored and countered, and heated debate could emerge. Instructors refrained from introducing their opinions, as long as the seminar members were building on each other’s ideas, or disagreeing with each other in a respectful manner. The instructors’ capacity to manage and contain emerging tensions contributed to the students’ high level of engagement and focused seminar participation.”

~ In-class observation

4. Punctuating the experience

Seminar discussion often takes its own course, and can lose direction and focus at times. When this happens, it is helpful to pause and reflect upon the direction, shifts, or outcomes of the discussion. Conscious attention to the ebb and flow of the conversation will ensure a more disciplined, focused, and lively discussion in the following sessions.

“At one point in the seminar, I noticed that, although students were engaged in a lively discussion, they were not paying attention to what had been said, how they were building or not building on each other’s ideas. I told them that the barn raising will not work unless we stop to admire what we have built. An important part of a collective barn raising experience is to have a party at the end and enjoy the barn. At the end of discussions, some of us were holding on to a piece of board, while others were holding on to the nails. Sometimes we built things that nobody could figure out. I wanted the students to pause and reflect on what they had built together, and even map out the course of the discussion that led to that final product. At the end of the seminar session, each one of the instructors drew his or her visual representation of the discussion on the board. “This is what you did. This is what the discussion looked like to me,” we said to the students. Because we were able to visually show the students how we experienced the conversation, it made them proud about what they had accomplished together. Students said, “Wow, that looks pretty cool and complex!” “Sure, we created something here.”

~SAGES writing instructor

5. Challenging with support

During the seminar discussions, it is common for students to withdraw after their first few attempts to introduce an idea. When that happens, encourage the students to develop and refine their arguments or thoughts. This will provide them with an opportunity to learn how to distinguish between facts from opinions, identify logical inconsistencies, and detect flaws in their decision making and judgment, and so on.

“I tried to get the students to make a point out of what they were saying. I would ask them something like, “Does that mean that this is the same thing as that?” I encouraged them not to back off the point they were trying to make, because very often they lose confidence after sometime and do not continue the discussion.”

~ SAGES instructor

“Many times, instructors are ambiguous about the students’ answers. They may say, “Well, you may be wrong, or you may be right.” Instructor F is not like that. He sometimes plays devil’s advocate and challenges our thinking. He creates controversies. Whenever there were controversies, there were far more opportunities to learn.”

~ SAGES student

Facilitating the Seminar



Process is as important as content

In the seminar format, one of your roles is to facilitate the process of the class. By this we mean facilitating the dialogue, ensuring participation from all students, keeping them on track, asking provocative questions, providing inspiring assignments, providing feedback, and engaging in other activities not related to pure content delivery.

It is helpful, therefore, to dedicate time to monitoring the process – before, during, and after each seminar. Hence the following suggestions:

Before each class

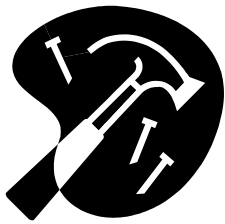
Before each class, consider your objectives and goals. Who are the students that need your encouragement? Who might need to be challenged? What are the content points that must be covered? What would be the best seminar process to accomplish your learning goal?

During each class

Keep an eye on the content of the course, but also notice what is going on among the students. Is the level of class engagement high or low? What is the pattern of interaction among the students? While it is virtually impossible to see and understand every dynamic in a group, the more elements you pay attention to, the better equipped you will be to guide the students on their journey.

After each class

After each class, reflect on what happened, what you noticed, and what you would like to focus on in the next session.



SPECIAL TOOLBOX:

When Things Get Personal

While giving a class presentation, one of your students starts to cry as he talks about his parents. He speaks of how much he misses them and how unhappy he is in Cleveland. He says that he hasn't made any friends yet and often feels very lonely...

What would you do in this situation?

“Personal moments” like this can arise during a SAGES class. Other examples involve revelations of sexual orientation, past family problems, and other personal issues.

“Students are willing to share personal things, and the faculty needs to be ready to handle that in the classroom.”

~ SAGES instructor

Should this be happening in SAGES?

Given that many of our students, especially in First Seminar, are experiencing a number of key life events and transitions—independence from parents, new social contexts and challenges, etc.—it is understandable that these moments would occur. Furthermore, the very nature of SAGES, with its emphasis on experiential learning, encourages students to reflect on their lives and engage personally with the material.

If, then, a student cries in class, or reveals something unexpected about his or her life, this is not something to be shocked by, nor is it a reason to overreact. Rather, the moment can be viewed as a positive “unfolding,” as students gain insight into their lives. It means that they are learning.

Here are a few simple steps we would like to suggest should a deeply personal and emotional event occur.

1) The Student

First and most important, **support and affirm the student**. Let the student know immediately that it is perfectly okay to experience such feelings and that the seminar is a safe place.

Beyond this, there is no “right” or “wrong” way to approach these situations, and you don't have to be a therapist to provide the necessary support. Just let the student know that you care about what he or she is experiencing.

Does this mean you should take the student outside? Should you stop the class?

Trust your instincts in this moment and **your own natural style—respond in whatever way you best express support, caring, and affirmation.**

Quite often, the best thing to do is simply remain “with” the student, instead of ignoring his or her experience and attempting to move on quickly to the next student. Wait as long as it takes for the student to calm down or return to a more normal state. Then ask whether he or she is ready to continue.

Once the class is finished, you can call the student aside to ask whether further support, from you or anyone else in the class, would be helpful. The goal here is not to solve the problem *for* the student, but rather to demonstrate that you are interested and care *about* the student. If appropriate, you can provide contact information for University Counseling Services (telephone: 368-5872).

If the situation seems more serious, you might also want to do the following:

- Send an email that same day, thanking the student for the honesty and courage expressed earlier in the class, and asking if there is anything you can do to help.
- Take the student aside in the following class to ask how things are going.
- If you would like further guidance, report the incident to the SAGES office. Faculty members will have varying levels of comfort and expertise with situations like this, and the SAGES staff is always available to help in any way possible.

In the Event of a Crisis

Should the situation in class be a real crisis, rather than simply an emotional moment, you should contact the SAGES office immediately. A threat of physical harm to the student (or another student) would be such a crisis.

2) The Group

If the situation is serious enough, you should address the issue of **confidentiality**. In a small community such as the undergraduate seminar, it is imperative that each student’s confidentiality be respected. You should make it clear that what has just happened is a very private moment that ought to remain within the group.

This would also be a good time to refer back to the norms—such as honesty, respect, and trust—that the students agreed upon at the start of the seminar. Hence the importance of that initial norm-setting phase.

Second, having addressed the issue of confidentiality, you can take the opportunity **to treat this as a learning moment for everyone.**

If the rest of the students can learn that it is acceptable to experience emotion in a classroom environment, that a teacher can be a “secure base” in such moments, and that these moments do not lead to a crisis or any form of overreaction, you will have taught them a valuable lesson—that **learning is deeply personal.**

Since this is an experience your students are likely to remember, it makes sense to regard it as a powerful learning opportunity—not as an embarrassment to be swept under the rug. The purpose, however, is not to stay focused on the student’s issue, or to spend undue time on the experience, but rather to treat it as a learning opportunity for everyone.

3) Yourself

It is important that you **support yourself** when such moments occur. The experience will in all likelihood affect you, and you will want to talk to someone about it—a colleague, someone in the SAGES office, a friend. “Holding” such a classroom moment is emotionally exhausting. So allow yourself the opportunity to seek out support, or simply a space to “debrief.” And even congratulate yourself for creating a classroom environment that is safe, engaging, and personal.

Key messages:

- It is normal for a personal moment to happen—it is not necessarily a crisis
- Your primary responsibility is to provide support and care in that moment
- Refer a student to the University Counseling Services if necessary
- Follow up with the student
- Ensure that the group respects confidentiality
- Try to make this a learning moment for the whole group
- Take time for yourself following such an event to reflect and seek support



Helpful Tip: Dealing with “Different” Students¹

The following tips will help you handle “different” students. Of course, there are dangers associated with labeling students, or regarding those with certain characteristics as “problem students.” We hope that the “suggestions” below will be useful, but be aware that **it is a mistake to reduce students to stereotypes** - to pigeonhole them into categories and then attempt to manage them according to some formula.

Person	Description	Effect	Suggestion
The Silent One	Withdrawn. May be bored, indifferent, timid or insecure.	You lose a portion of the group’s power. May have a negative effect on others in the group. The silent ones hamper their own learning.	Ask for their opinions. Draw out the person sitting next to them, then ask the quiet one what they think of the view just expressed. If you are near them, ask their view so they feel they are talking to you, not to the whole group. Compliment the silent ones when they do speak. Give positive verbal and nonverbal reinforcement.
The Eager Beaver	Overly talkative. Monopolizes the conversation. May be a show-off or just very well informed and anxious to demonstrate it.	Can shut out other members.	Don’t be embarrassing or sarcastic. Interrupt with “That’s an interesting point. What do the rest of you think about it?” Might also use body language: use your hands (like a traffic cop) to diminish their talking while encouraging others.
The Overachiever	Although really trying to help, tends to dominate.	Shuts out others and may monopolize in a genuine effort to be helpful.	Recognize the valuable traits of such persons. Thank them. Cut off tactfully by questioning others. Use them for summarizing.
The Verbal Stumbler	Lacks ability to express opinions. Has the ideas but finds it difficult to put them into words.	Frustration, for the person and the group.	Help the person out. Rephrase his statements: “Let me see if I understand...,” then paraphrase his point.” Don’t say, “What you mean is...” Keep the ideas intact and check for understanding.

Continued...

¹ De Janasz, S. C.; Dowd, K. O.; and Schneider, B. (2002). *Interpersonal skills in organizations*. Boston: McGraw Hill.

Person	Description	Effect	Solution
The Heckler	Combative individual who wants to play devil's advocate or who is emotionally upset.	Can trap you into a one-on-one fight and can stimulate in-group conflict.	Stay calm. Don't become defensive. Don't lose your temper. Try to find merit in ONE of his points...then move on. Talk to him privately and appeal for his cooperation if the heckling persists.
The Fighters	Two or more persons clash at the personality level.	Can divide the group and cause uneasy feelings and tension in the group.	Interrupt politely but firmly. Stress points of agreement, minimize points of disagreement. Ask direct questions on the topic.
The Sidetracker	Off the subject or agenda.	Can cause confusion and waste the group's time.	Take the blame for sidetracking <i>them</i> : "Something I said must have led you off the subject. This is what we should be discussing..."



?? Questions for Reflection

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Questions for personal reflection:

- How do I feel about the different roles of the seminar leader?
- What are my strengths in this format?
- What are the areas where I will need to improve or be more mindful?
- What is my biggest hope for leading a seminar?
- What is my biggest concern about leading a seminar?

Questions for reflection with colleagues:

- How have you handled group dynamics in your class?
- How do you set the stage of the seminar in the beginning of the semester?