
**COLLABORATIVE
LEARNING
TECHNIQUE**
30
Paper Seminar

Characteristics

Group Size	4-6
Time on Task	VARIABLES
Duration of Groups	MULTIPLE SESSIONS
Online Transferability	HIGH

DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE In this CoLT, a student makes a formal presentation of an original paper to a small group of peers. Within the group, one or two students act as formal respondents to the paper. The entire group then engages in a discussion of the paper's content, interpretation, and underlying assumptions and values. Paper Seminar provides a framework for groups to engage in deep discussion, exchanging and probing ideas that students have brought from their research and their individual readings of the paper. It also gives individual students focused attention and feedback on their work, while avoiding the multiple student presentations to the entire class that can be time intensive and tiresome.

- PREPARATION**
- *Instructors:* Assign and monitor the writing of the papers and determine a timeline that gives students adequate time to prepare for and conduct the seminar. Consider giving students guidance on how to read the paper critically and prepare a formal response. Plan for sufficient time, as this activity may need to be distributed over several sessions. For example, each student's paper may take approximately 40 minutes. For a group of four, that means 160 minutes. It is best to have one or two papers per class session.
 - *Presenters:* Write the paper, distribute copies to group members, and organize comments for a five to ten minute verbal summary of the paper to the group.

- *Respondent*: Read the paper, take notes, and formulate significant questions for the group to discuss.
- *Group Member*: Read the paper, marking the text for interesting passages, and jotting down questions and comments for the discussion.

- PROCEDURE**
1. Assign students to groups, and tell students that they will all be responding formally and informally to peers' papers in their group.
 2. Determine who will serve as formal respondent for each paper. For groups of four, assign one formal respondent; for groups of six, consider assigning two formal respondents.
 3. Explain to students the time frame and tasks.
 4. On the day of the Paper Seminar, give the first presenters time to formally present their papers to their groups (such as five to ten minutes).
 5. Allow respondents to respond (such as ten minutes).
 6. Give groups time to discuss the paper (such as twenty minutes).
 7. Follow the same sequence of activities for the second presenters, and so forth.

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EXAMPLES

Survey of World Geography

Throughout this course, students studied the physical, cultural, and economic features of the world's major culture regions and nations. Professor Cara Bean wanted to provide students with an opportunity to integrate and synthesize key concepts. She decided to assign students to write papers requiring that they apply a range of ideas covered in class to a hypothetical situation, and to present and discuss these papers in a Paper Seminar. An example of one prompt follows:

Even though economic development can have many positive effects in a country, various development strategies can ignore or take away investment in social services, and even entrench wide income disparities. Define your conception of a good quality of life. Imagine that you have been elected the leader of a small tropical island. Write a paper describing the policies you would implement to make sure that the resources (including land, water, beaches, spices, and bananas) are not jeopardized by world cartels and trading blocks and that your citizens would enjoy a prosperous quality of life.

For the Paper Seminar, she organized students into groups of four and assigned one formal respondent for each paper. She asked respondents to pay particular attention to how well the author had applied course concepts and theories to the supposed scenario. Professor Bean felt that the seminar provided a structure for students to compare ideas and to probe more deeply the issues underlying the hypothetical situation.

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Principles of Marketing

Professor Sal N. Stuff wanted students to explore in-depth a market planning strategy. She decided to use a combination of *CoLT 28: Collaborative Writing* and *CoLT 30: Paper Seminar* to give students an assignment that had real-world applicability. She asked students to identify product lines to market (for example, furniture, apparel, cooking equipment, and so forth). As students generated ideas, she wrote the ideas on the board. She then invited students to choose a product for which they were most interested in serving as a marketing consultant, and organized students into pairs or triads accordingly.

She assigned each group to research the advantages and disadvantages of online distribution for their chosen product. As students conducted their research, they were asked to consider the following:

- The cost of designing and maintaining a Web site
- The likelihood that target consumers are Internet shoppers
- The industry trends in that product area: for example, are other businesses selling similar products online, and how successful are they?
- The opportunity to expand inventory without increasing the cost of retail space, catalogue production, or mailing
- The opportunity to have a store that never closes
- The lack of trust about credit card purchasing on the Web
- The difficulty that shoppers have in finding a Web site when they do not know the store's name and URL
- Potential customer frustration and waste of time conducting Web searches
- The certainty that the site will not reach customers who do not use computers or shop on the Internet.

Based on their findings, she asked students to write a persuasive memo to the company's owner stating their position about expanding to an online distribution system (CAT 12, *Analytic Memo*, Angelo & Cross, 1993, pp. 177–180). She told students to include in the memo information that would counter expected objections. For the Paper Seminar, she told students to present their memos as if they were consultants hired by the business's owner. She assigned two respondents for each analytic memo, one responding from the perspective of the business owner, and another from the perspective of the chief financial officer or accountant. The entire group discussed the analysis and proposal and attempted to determine an effective marketing decision based on the memo.

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Screenplay Writing

The primary goal of this online course was to teach students how to write effective screenplays for film and television. The instructor used a variety of readings, Threaded Discussions, written assignments, and quizzes to help students learn the components and process of screenplay writing. The components included how to structure stories, develop characters, and craft dialogue; the process included conceptualization, organization, and execution. To help students synthesize the individual aspects of the course, he decided to implement a final project followed by a Paper Seminar. The final project was to write a one-act play. He allowed students to choose their medium and genre: for a teleplay, students could choose a situation comedy, a dramatic series, or a single event program; for screenplays, students could choose fiction or documentary.

When students had finished writing the screenplay, the professor formed groups of six, organized by medium (television or film), assigned a primary respondent per screenplay, and asked each student to e-mail their one-act to the five other group members. The professor created a private discussion area for each group, and asked each author to introduce their screenplay's "thread" of the discussion by explaining why they had chosen the medium, genre, and topic, their primary artistic goal for the one-act, any particular problems they had encountered, and so forth. The professor asked primary respondents to post second-level

comments, reviewing the screenplay from the perspective of a producer considering adopting the screenplay. The remaining group members then posted additional comments, focusing on how the screenwriter had handled the different components and process, with special attention on each author's ability to take into account the visual nature and unique requirements of writing for television or film. The professor felt that Paper Seminar provided each screenwriter with substantive and constructive feedback without significantly increasing his workload, and it also gave students practice identifying effective and ineffective features in screenplays.

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ONLINE IMPLEMENTATION

Organize students into groups, and create for each group a separate, private discussion area. Students can exchange papers for review through e-mail attachments. The students who have been assigned the role of formal respondent can post their comments on the group's Threaded Discussion board. Other members of the group can then post additional comments.

VARIATIONS AND EXTENSIONS

- Instead of writing a paper, have students read a collection of texts or journal articles. Ask each individual to prepare an oral presentation with their analysis or interpretation of one of the reading assignments for the seminar. The primary respondent can provide the initial feedback, and then the whole group can discuss the presenter's comments.
- Use this CoLT to provide students with feedback on other kinds of assignments, such as on drawings, paintings, music compositions or performances, and so forth.
- Combine this CoLT with other CoLTs, such as *CoLT 15: Case Study* or *CoLT 28: Collaborative Writing* for a more extensive collaborative experience.

OBSERVATIONS AND ADVICE

Students may not be comfortable sharing their writing with others; therefore, give students time and support as they write their papers. Consider connecting this CoLT with *CoLT 27: Peer Editing* so that students receive feedback on their writing before it is presented to the larger group.

The Paper Seminar is a place for students to discover new ideas, to reexamine old ideas, or to develop insightful connections among ideas. The group is responsible for exploring the text and probing the ideas that people

have brought from their individual reading of the text. It is a time to "mine" the text, to think aloud about it, and to test some ideas against the group. The exchange of ideas is focused and aimed at getting more deeply into the source.

The seminar works best when the respondent has prepared a thoughtful response and when all students have read the same text carefully. Therefore provide students with guidance on how to read critically. Help them to understand that a critical reader tries to comprehend the literal meaning of the words, to relate the information to what they already know, to distinguish between fact and opinion, to draw inferences about the author's viewpoint, and to evaluate and develop an informed opinion about the material.

Do not try to do all the papers in one session. Students will get overloaded or bored with the activity, and they will not continue to respond as well. This activity should be conducted over several sessions.

KEY RESOURCES Habeshaw, S., Habeshaw, T. & Gibbs, G. (1984). *53 interesting things to do in your seminars and tutorials*. Bristol: Technical & Educational Studies.

Harnish, J. *What's in a seminar?* Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education. Retrieved April 20, 2003, from <http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/WhatsSeminar.shtml>

Collaborative Learning Techniques

A Handbook for
College Faculty

**Elizabeth F. Barkley,
K. Patricia Cross, and
Claire Howell Major**

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