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Planning, Practice, and Assessment In the Seminar Classroom

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The Paideia Seminar was first defined as part of philosopher Mortimer Adler's Paideia Program in *The Paideia Proposal* (1982) and two other books that followed (*Paideia Problems and Possibilities*, 1983, and *The Paideia Program*, 1984) shortly thereafter. From the beginning, this teaching and learning strategy was intended to be used as part of a systemic, transformational program that would eventually affect all aspects of a school community. The seminar itself was a teaching strategy designed to engage students in the formal discussion of a text leading to their enhanced understanding of the ideas and values inherent to that text. More recently, the National Paideia Center has defined the Paideia Seminar as "a collaborative, intellectual dialogue facilitated with open-ended questions about a text," and stressed that it should enhance both the intellectual and social development of students (see *Teaching for Understanding: the Paideia Classroom* and *The Paideia Seminar: Active Thinking Through Dialogue*). Because facilitating seminars requires that teachers play a non-traditional role in relation to their students, we (the staff of the National Paideia Center) have been forced to explore in detail how teachers successfully master a new technique—specifically, the use of dialogic instruction.

Dialogic instruction (as the term is typically used) differs from traditional classroom discussion in at least three important ways. First, even though the teacher typically chooses the text to be discussed, the student participants share in deciding what ideas and values from the text are important enough to be discussed, and the talk among the seminar participants reflects this. Second, understanding of the ideas and values is created by the group, rather than found by the students or given to the students by the teacher. Third, because decisions about the construction of understanding are shared by the group, the teacher gives up some, or all, of her authority to control the content and form of the discussion, including who talks, about what, and to what effect. Although there is not a vast amount of research on dialogic instruction, there are a number of important studies (see, for example, Nystrand, 1997; Wells, 1999, 2001; Billings and Fitzgerald, 2002) that sup-

port the instructional value in consistently asking students to think coherently and creatively about the curriculum. The Paideia Seminar, as we define and teach it, is a clear example of using dialogic instruction to teach intellectual as well as social skills.

For the case study described here, we collected data in the following ways. We asked students to complete a questionnaire to identify talk preferences in whole class groups. We interviewed Lynne Murray, the teacher, to establish a basic description of her approach to planning seminars. Murray's seminar discussions were audio taped and field notes were taken—to track talk sequence as well as other factors not captured on tape. Murray then shared her seminar plans (including pre- and post-seminar activities as well as questions), the text when possible, and her notes taken during the seminar. In addition, a group of eight students—four who both stated and displayed a preference to talk in whole class groups and four more quiet students—were interviewed. Finally, Murray was interviewed at the end of the semester and then again about six months after all of the classroom observations were completed.

The most significant finding that we derived from our year-long study of the Paideia Seminar in Lynne Murray's classroom was that the seminars began to improve only when she focused considerable post-seminar time and energy on assessing what happened during the dialogue and then used the data gleaned from that assessment to deliberately plan the next seminar in the series. This cycle of planning, practice, and assessment involved both the teaching and learning process of *the seminar as well as its curricular content*. *This clear pattern led us to the following conclusion: that teaching practice only improves when it takes place consistently within a full Teaching Cycle of deliberate planning, careful practice, and thoughtful assessment.*

The *Teaching Cycle* (as we define it here) has three parts:

- Detailed planning of the process and content of the pedagogical event;
- Careful practice of the planned event;

- Thoughtful post-event assessment of the process and content.

It is important to note that all three stages involve both teachers and students working in collaboration (often with the collaboration increasing over time). The Paideia Seminar provides an excellent medium for studying the Teaching Cycle because it is self-contained by design: the formal discussion itself taking place within one class "period," even when pre- and post-seminar activities may occur in the days before and after the seminar. In other words, the Teaching Cycle becomes much more specific when we use the Paideia Seminar as a model:

- Detailed planning of the seminar process and content;
- Careful practice of the entire seminar cycle; and
- Thoughtful post-seminar assessment of the seminar process and content.

For clarity's sake it is important to note that the **seminar cycle** itself involves the teacher working with students in pre-seminar process and content activities, the seminar discussion, and post-seminar process and content activities.

Years of helping teachers learn to facilitate seminars have taught us that what the teacher does both alone and with students before and after the seminar discussion has as much to do with the quality of the discussion as what they do while it is going on. In fact, pre-seminar planning and preparation and post-seminar assessment on the part of the teacher may well have more to do with quality seminar instruction than what she does during the discussion itself. This realization opens up the possibility for a very different view of teaching than the traditional teacher-as-performer model. If the secret to powerful teaching lies in what happens before and after the singular event in the classroom, then great teachers are "made, not born," and they are "made" during the planning and assessment parts of the Teaching Cycle.

Our year-long case study of the Paideia Seminar in Lynne Murray's room suggests precisely this model. By all accounts, Murray is a popular and successful teacher, who inspires her students

