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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

even as she prepares them for North Carolina's standardized "End-of-Course" tests. As gifted a teacher as she is, however, she discovered during the course of this year that she needed to focus her attention on how she both planned and then assessed each seminar in turn in order to improve their quality. In effect, she had to step back and use the entire Teaching Cycle in order to produce classroom seminars of an acceptable quality. As the formal seminars she held with her students increased in quality, the focus of her efforts—and of our study—became the detailed planning and preparation she did in advance of and the extensive assessment she did after each seminar.

Seminar Planning and Preparation

The first stage of the Teaching Cycle is the "detailed planning of process and content" in advance of the teaching event. Part of Lynne Murray's planning always reflected appropriate sections of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, specifically that which she was responsible for delivering to her students. In her first seminar of the year with this 10th grade class, she planned to address the writing requirement that would be tested partway through the tenth grade. In describing this first seminar, Murray wrote:

Because the North Carolina Writing Test is currently under revision, and we have very little idea what kind of writing the test will require, I went to the NC Standard Course of Study to see what kinds of writing are expected. One is a reminiscence about an object, place, or person. I decided that this could become the focus of a short coached project, with the final draft being the product . . . I wanted to find a text that dealt with greed, desire for an object, valued possessions to connect our [seminar] discussion . . . to the writing assignment. (Murray, August 22, 2002)

As a result of this planning process, Murray chose an excerpt titled "The Hoard" from the work of J. R. R. Tolkien because it gave her the opportunity to have students write deliberately in the vein of the standardized writing test.

With every seminar that she planned for the study class during the 2002-03 school year, Murray took a great deal of trouble to plan discussions that focused on specific standards. In planning a seminar to accompany a unit on the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, she chose as a seminar text a poem titled "Prayer to Masks" by Leopold Sedar Senghor. According to Murray, she chose this text because:

This addresses the SCS [NC Standard Course of Study] goals 1.02: Respond reflectively (through small group discussion, etc.) to written and visual texts by exhibiting an awareness of culture in which text is set or in which text was written. 4.02: Analyze thematic connections among literary works by showing an understanding of cultural context. 5.01: Read and analyze selected works of world literature by using effective strategies for preparation, engagement, and reflection and understanding the importance of cultural and historical impact on literary texts, and analyzing literary devices. (Murray, September 3, 2002)

Murray focused on the Paideia Seminar as a delivery vehicle for the conceptual elements of the Standard Course of Study throughout the school year, effectively reminding us that this level of planning by classroom teachers is not only possible but eminently desirable.

In addition to choosing texts that delivered elements of her standardized curriculum, Murray also planned activities that focused on curricular objectives. For example, many of her pre-seminar content activities involved modeling and practicing the use of various reading strategies. Her planned seminar questions asked students to consider curricular ideas and values (the role of culture in Senghor's "Prayer to Masks" for example) in an active, student-centered way. Finally, her post-seminar content activities continued this focus on the curriculum, often by asking students to practice their writing skills (as in the paper based in part on Tolkien's "The Hoard").

In addition to the standards identified by the state curriculum, there is in every classroom

another, often hidden, curriculum that has to do with the values expressed in that space. In his seminal work on the seminar from the 1980s, Adler argued that valuable classroom discussion was often about values as well as ideas. In more recent years, we have come to see that seminar practice itself “values” certain social habits: collaboration, active listening, gracious disagreement, intellectual respect, and others. Indeed, the focus of most “pre-seminar process” activities is to coach these skills in anticipation of the discussion to come. After several seminars at the beginning of the research year, Murray chose to focus the attention of her class on these collaborative “values” because the seminars were being dominated by a few aggressive students while others either sat back or were intimidated into silence. As a result, too few points of view were being articulated and too few ideas brought into circulation.

In order to create a more democratic discussion, Murray began to focus her own attention on planning pre-seminar process activities designed to improve the quality of the discussion by involving many more students in a more collaborative way. In reflecting on her seminar on a “Prayer to Masks,” Murray wrote that “I didn’t help the flow of seminar by forgetting to have students set a personal goal for participation, . . . [and] when I look at my map [seating chart and notes taken during the seminar], I realize there’s room for much growth. The participation rested primarily on six people and eight people didn’t speak at all” (Murray, September 3, 2002). As a result of these and similar experiences, Murray prepared different pre-seminar instructions to the students and different activities focused more directly on the *process* of seminar discussion. For example, on January 14, 2003, in introducing a seminar discussion on an excerpt from Aristotle’s “Ethics,” Murray reminded her students that:

[You] are speaking to each other, not to me. We allow one person to speak at a time. We disagree without becoming defensive or offensive. In other words, we disagree without being disagreeable. We understand that there can be more than one right answer. While we are supporting our ideas with the text, we understand

that another’s person’s opinion can be valid as well. So, when we disagree, let’s please be attentive to our tone.

In addition to reminding students to pay attention to the *shared* process of their discussion, she also asked them to commit to a *personal* process goal.

On the back of your text, I have copied the seminar self-assessment. . . . What I’d like for you to do is, just like we did the other day, is to check off, basically how you assess yourself in past seminars. Then I’d like for you . . . to write down your personal goal for the day.

These strategies are all aimed at expanding the number of speakers in the seminar by distributing the number of talk turns and the amount of talk time more evenly across the group. In this way, Murray hoped to expand the number of ideas introduced into the discussion as well as the connections made between ideas. Like many experienced seminar leaders, she saw the connection between the seminar as an exercise in social skills with the seminar as an exercise in intellectual skills.

As the year progressed and she assessed the relative success of her students in seminar, Murray also planned differently for the pre-seminar *content* work she did with students. She began to question how she was introducing her seminar texts as early as September 2002 when she reflected on the seminar she had led on “Prayer to Masks.”

Overall, the seminar from my perspective was disappointing. Although in their seminar reflections students said they understood the text better, they still didn’t leave with a deep understanding. Several mentioned that they didn’t meet their speaking goal because they either didn’t like the text or didn’t really understand it. . . . I . . . may reconsider [the seminar’s] placement. While students had read [*Things Fall Apart*] entirely, we [had] not discussed the conflict created by the clash of cultures. Next time, we may have that discussion prior to the [seminar] examination of the masks. . . . (Murray, September 3, 2002)

As the year went on, Murray gave a lot of thought to where in her units of study to situate her seminars, specifically with regards to how much she wanted students to know about the texts and how much she wanted them to have thought about the relevant ideas and values in advance.

Murray realized that pre-seminar process and pre-seminar content activities paved the way for powerful, even profound, seminar discussions. She began to act on her realization that pre-seminar process work raises student awareness of and increases student skill at participation in discussion—creating a dialogue that is both genuine and collaborative. Pre-seminar content work gives students access to the raw material of discussion by providing them with a ready familiarity of the text. What Murray realized as the year went on is that detailed planning of what she did with her students *prior* to the seminar was extremely important. No matter how careful she was in selecting a text and in writing questions, the seminar might still disappoint unless she helped students prepare for both the process and content of the discussion.

Within the larger Teaching Cycle of planning, practice, and assessment, there is in the Paideia Seminar a smaller cycle of pre-seminar activities, seminar dialogue, and post-seminar activities. An individual teacher often performs parts of the larger Teaching Cycle either alone or with other teachers. She or he performs this smaller cycle of teaching and learning activities with the students. In other words, once the teacher has planned the entire seminar cycle, she or he then works through pre-seminar process and content activities, the seminar discussion itself, and the post-seminar process and content activities with the students as one coherent, on-going "lesson." What we learned in spending a year studying seminar practice with Lynne Murray is that all three stages of the seminar cycle (pre-seminar, seminar, and post-seminar) only improved within the deliberate use of the larger Teaching Cycle (deliberate Planning, careful Practice, and thoughtful Assessment).

Seminar Practice

The second stage of the Teaching Cycle is the "careful practice of the entire seminar cycle." The National Paideia Center defines the Paideia

Seminar as "a collaborative, intellectual dialogue facilitated with open-ended questions about a text." Once a teacher like Lynne Murray has planned thoroughly and deliberately (as part of the Teaching Cycle) and coached her students through pre-seminar process and content activities, the dialogue itself takes place. It is "intellectual" in nature because it is focused on the ideas and values inherent to the text, and it is "collaborative" because its relative success or failure depends on how well students listen and respond to each other's statements, thereby constructing increasingly more sophisticated understandings of the text. Thus, when Murray was describing an early, less successful seminar, she wrote that "the . . . thing we need to work on is the level of dialogue. There are answers to my questions, but it's mostly popcorn style rather than students building on each other's responses" (September 3, 2002). What Murray was longing for was the kind of intellectual collaboration that leads to a more sophisticated level of understanding by all the seminar participants—the true goal of seminar dialogue.

Not only is the Paideia Seminar about student collaboration, it also stresses intellectual innovation on the part of the participants. In addition to stressing to her students that they learn to build "on each other's responses," Murray also encouraged them to think creatively in response to the texts in her seminars. She both encouraged them in pre-seminar instructions by stressing "there can be more than one right answer" (September 3, 2002), and she asked pointedly open-ended questions throughout her seminars, whether the questions were planned in advance or asked in follow-up to a student comment. In a September 23, 2002 seminar on excerpts from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, for example, she asked as her opening question "Which character [Caliban or Ariel] is most human?" and then stressed that students had to justify their answers by referring to the text. She followed this with a first core question that asked students to discuss the various reasons why "Caliban curse[d] Prospero for teaching him language." In each instance, she was asking students to provide multiple right answers to her original question so that they could develop a more sophisticated understanding of the text by comparing, contrasting,

and eventually synthesizing their individual answers. In planning the questions she would ask in seminars throughout the year, Murray consistently emphasized the open-endedness of the possible responses, thereby allowing students to think and speak for themselves.

She followed the same pattern in the follow-up questions that she asked—those questions framed in response to student comment or comments. One way in which she was able to do this effectively was by disciplining herself to “map” the seminar discussion as it was taking place. Mapping involves creating a seating chart that graphically represents the students in terms of where they are seated in the circle. The teacher then takes detailed notes on the flow of the conversation: tallying responses, noting student questions and references to the text, and marking specific references by one student to another’s comments. In addition to these process-focused notes, Murray also learned to take notes on students’ comments as they were making them, allowing her to refer back specifically to their statements in asking questions that would further develop the dialogue. For example, in her September 3, 2002 seminar on “Prayer to Masks,” Murray referenced a particular student by name and then went on to say:

... you made reference to the line “rebirth of the world.” Where [in the poem] was that? “Let us report *present* at the rebirth of the World.” What does that mean exactly?

Interestingly enough, the transcript shows that three students (other than the one Murray initially named) responded in the ensuing moments, suggesting that her question spurred the entire dialogue, not just a response from a single student. In both her planned as well as her more spontaneous follow-up questions, Murray successfully invited creative, independent thought about her texts—by stressing the open-endedness of appropriate response.

All of these descriptions of the Paideia Seminar itself (its collaborative as well as its independent and intellectual nature) led us with Lynne Murray’s help to describe what we would term ideal dialogical moments: in other words, those places in student seminars where the discus-

sion is most collaborative and intellectual. In essence, Murray’s goal throughout her year-long practice with the seminar, was to create extended moments during classroom dialogue wherein:

- Multiple students (more than two) addressed serious statements to each other, not the teacher;
- Student statements addressed the ideas and values inherent to the text;
- Students referenced each other’s statements in such a way as to create meaning out of the juxtaposition; and
- Multiple students experienced greater understanding of the text as a result.

These moments were rare early in the year, leading Murray to invest more time and energy in both assessing her seminars after holding them and in planning successive seminars based in part on the earlier ones. Having a clear picture of what she wanted the seminar to eventually be like helped with the post-seminar assessment as well as the pre-seminar planning.

Post-Seminar Assessment

The third stage in the Teaching Cycle is the “thoughtful post-seminar assessment of process and content.” In Lynne Murray’s classroom, this process started immediately after her seminars when she involved her students in assessing both their own individual seminar participation and the performance of the group as a whole. For example after her October 4, 2002 seminar on a mural painting titled “Gassed” (depicting a World War I battle scene), she asked students to self-assess in writing:

At this time then, I would like for you to reflect on your participation in seminar. If you met your [pre-determined, individual] goal, tell me how you met it, and how you feel about it. If you did not meet your goal, tell me why you didn’t meet your goal. What were the barriers for you meeting your goal today. (Seminar Transcript)

There are two important things to note here: one, that Murray thought it important that her students play an integral role in the assessment process; and two, that she focused their atten-

tion on seminar process skills as well as mastery of the content. Paideia-trained teachers routinely involve their students in extensive self-assessment as a way of causing them to take responsibility for their own learning behaviors. Murray's expressed intent throughout the year was to help students both understand and take responsibility for the quality of her seminar discussions, and post-seminar self-assessment was a key part of that process.

Although the October 4 class period ended a few minutes later, limiting the post-seminar activities on that day, Murray commonly asked students to assess the extent to which they had met a group process goal or goals they had set together prior to the seminar. During the last seminar of the class, for example, Murray used the "seminar map" she had drawn during the seminar to help students reflect on a group process goal. Prior to the seminar, she had discussed with students the need for the participants "to think about how [they] can connect with the ideas that someone else has presented. . . and . . . when doing so, to refer to [the other student] by name" ("Ethics" Seminar Transcript). She mapped the seminar on an overhead transparency, taking care to indicate those instances when a student connected his or her thought to that of another, so that she could share this data with students at the end of the seminar. Displaying the transparency with an overhead projector, she explained to her students:

The arrows [from one student's name to another] mean that you responded to, or connected to somebody else's idea. So, that was one of our goals today. And you can see that we did that quite a bit. That we did respond. Almost everybody who did speak responded to someone else. Today, I added the little star[s to indicate] if you refer to somebody by name. . . . And what I would like for you to do is to reflect on the seminar today on the bottom of [your] sheet. Look at the behaviors. Check the things that you did today. ("Ethics" Seminar Transcript, January 14, 2003).

"Look at the behaviors. Check the things that *you* did today." What Murray did not do is evaluate the students herself; rather, she gave them

the information they needed to assess themselves, asking them to take responsibility for their own improvement.

Interestingly, Lynne Murray used the same tool—the seminar maps she created during each seminar—to assess her own leadership skills during the course of the semester. In reflecting on the very first seminar of the semester, the August 22, 2002 seminar on "The Hoard," she wrote:

While I was pleased with the level of interaction, my map tells me that we need to build the number of textual references. I had three males involved in sidebar conversations, and they were very, very quiet [in terms of speaking to the group]. The dialogue was dominated by 8 people, and 5 people didn't speak at all. We need to work on encouraging everyone to speak in seminar and make the sidebar guys feel comfortable enough to share their ideas with the whole group. (Reflection, August 22, 2002)

Murray was able to be this precise in her post-seminar reflections because she was referring directly to her seminar map while she was writing. She had collected both significant and detailed data ("The dialogue was dominated by 8 people, and 5 people didn't speak at all.") that she could use to coach her students. Furthermore, she could with validity compare the data from this seminar to similar data from succeeding seminars. And finally, she could revise her own facilitation in subsequent seminars based on what she discovered: "we need to work on encouraging everyone to speak . . . and make the sidebar guys feel comfortable enough to share their ideas."

In addition to the seminar map, which records the teacher's notes taken during the seminar itself, Murray also used a self-assessment tool titled the "Seminar Teaching Guide" to document her thoughts about some of the seminars she led after they were over. The Seminar Teaching Guide is a 36 item checklist that asks teachers to note the presence or absence of key seminar ingredients in four categories: one, *Preparation for Seminar*; two, *Teacher as Facilitator*; three, *Questioning Strategies*; and

four, *Student Participation*. While the Seminar Teaching Guide can be used by a colleague or other observer who is visiting a classroom seminar, it is perhaps most profitably used by a teacher to self-assess. The detail contained in the document reminds the teacher of everything from fairly simple elements like “teacher was seated on the same level as the students with them in the seminar” to much more sophisticated behavior like “teacher accepted, encouraged, AND supported divergent views and opinions.” Teachers like Lynne Murray can use this objective checklist to remind themselves of what a mature seminar can and should look like; they can also use it to remind themselves of their own developing strengths as a seminar facilitator, so that they set continuing goals for themselves as well as for their students.

Perhaps the single most valuable lesson we learned from spending a semester in Lynne Murray’s classroom, studying her growth as a seminar facilitator and the growth of her students as seminar participants, was the importance of teacher reflection after the seminar was concluded and teacher preparation prior to the next seminar. Murray herself was a model of determination and candor: constantly noting the weaknesses as well as the strengths of her performance and that of her students. As a result, she was able to plan increasingly successful seminars during the course of the year and educate her students about their own evolving learning behaviors. Simply put: we learned more about planning and assessing seminars than we did about their actual facilitation on the day of the discussion.

Implications for the Teaching Cycle

In spending a semester in Lynne Murray’s classroom, studying her Paideia Seminar practice, we saw a gifted teacher struggling to master a difficult teaching and learning practice, the Paideia Seminar. More specifically, we saw her improve her facilitation of Paideia Seminars through deliberate, even painstaking, post-seminar assessment and pre-seminar planning. These observations have led us to the conclusion that the only way seminar facilitation can improve—and by extension, any complex teaching practice—is through the consistent practice of the entire Teaching Cycle:

- 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.

The implications of this realization are profound: teachers need the time, encouragement, and coaching necessary to improve their planning and assessment skills. Without these forms of assistance, their actual teaching practice is unlikely to ever improve. However, in this way, we as teachers—and servants of teachers—can improve classroom practice such that those improvements are both lasting and effective.

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