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<i>Planning, Practice and Assessment In the Seminar Classroom</i>	Laura Billings Terry Roberts	1
Using Womanist Caring as a Framework to Teach Social Foundations	Sheryl Conrad Cozart Jerry Gordon	9
Teachers Must Not Pass Along Popular “Myths” Regarding the Supposed Omnipotence of the Mass Media	David L. Martinson	16
“Don’t Sell Them Dreams without the Foundations”: Collaboration for the Transitional Needs of Foster Care Adolescents with Disabilities	John M. Palladino	22
Promoting Reading Amidst Repeated Failure: Meeting the Challenges	S. Joel Warrican	33
Designing Learning Through Learning to Design	Punya Mishra Mark Girod	44

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)

