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POINT OF VIEW

The Well-Tempered Seminar

By JAY PARINI

Anyone who has been privileged to sit through first-rate seminars understands their value. The seminar is that midpoint between the lecture and the individual tutorial, that place in the curriculum where students get to test their knowledge of a discipline against a professor's. Seminars can be exacting, exhilarating experiences for the teacher and the student alike, although conducting them is difficult work; it requires a number of skills that can only be acquired through practice and self-discipline.

As college teachers, we usually had no opportunity in graduate school to conduct a seminar and, for the most part, rely on our memory of good seminars to imagine how to lead one ourselves. I had one or two in graduate school that prepared me rather well for thinking about the form, and I often talked with my fellow students about what worked and what didn't. It so happened that several of my former teachers or friends had studied at Oxford with the legendary classicist Eduard Fraenkel, a Berliner who fled the Nazis in 1934, settling into a chair in classical literature at Corpus Christi College, where he became an instant legend, attracting the best young classicists of the era to his seminars.

"I was terrified in those seminars," Iris Murdoch (the novelist and philosopher, who studied with Fraenkel in the late '30s) once said to me. "Fraenkel did not suffer fools gladly." Fraenkel had written landmark studies of Plautus and Horace, and he was later justly famous for an edition of the *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus that became the standard by which all future editions of classical texts (and commentaries) would be judged. His own commentary was extraordinarily rich and astute, referring to centuries of scholarship with apparent ease, making endless little (but illuminating) judgments along the way: the sort of thing that anyone conducting the Platonic ideal of a seminar might do.

Indeed, Fraenkel reflected on the influence of his Oxford seminars on his later scholarship in his edition of the *Agamemnon*: "Without the inspiring, and often correcting, co-operation of those young men and women I should not have been able to complete the commentary. If they thought a passage to be particularly difficult, that was sufficient reason for me to examine and discuss it as fully as I could; and more than once it was their careful preparation, their inquisitiveness, and their persistent efforts that made it possible to reach what seemed to us like a satisfactory solution."

Fraenkel's own teaching style was austere. My old friend Gordon Williams, a well-known classics scholar from Yale who had been a student of Fraenkel's, once wrote: "These seminars were occasions of formidable and immediate confrontations with a very great scholar and, as such, terrifying. A victim once laughingly described the scene as a circle of rabbits addressed by a stoat. But most students learnt to forget terror in the sheer interest of learning to express their ideas and of having them tested against Fraenkel's scholarship and in applying some of his techniques themselves."

I doubt that anyone has ever sat in dread in my seminars, and I'm rather glad for that. The old Germanic version of the professor as master of the universe does not wash in the democratic world of American colleges. And it is worth remembering that students do not require a dominating and erudite figure to feel intimidated. It's frightening enough to have to say something, anything, around a seminar table, in front of your peers.

For all his austerity, Fraenkel understood that give-and-take is necessary for good teaching. The seminar demands a

fluidity, an ease, wherein the pursuit of truth rises above any ego demands of the teacher. It comes alive in the dialectic, the process of working toward a sense of shared understanding. Fraenkel put his trust in his students, in their ability to listen, to make fine discriminations, and to apply what he later called "the common sense of the young," something that can get lost as one ages.

Needless to say, few leaders of seminars can hope to match Fraenkel, but one can learn a good deal by listening to accounts of such a teacher. When I began teaching, at Dartmouth in the mid-'70s, I was handed a seminar in my first year. I chose the topic, "The Artist and Society." I still recall the polished table in the room, a dozen eager and highly intelligent students huddled around it. The main memory I have is hearing the sound of my own voice. I was frightened, and I talked way too much. When students talked, I was too busy thinking up my responses to hear what they were saying in a deep way. It would not surprise me if they all found the seminar very boring.

I have learned, over the years, to listen more attentively when students speak, and to take what they say -- even the "foolish" things -- seriously. Paying attention does not mean simply turning your eyes in the student's direction, focusing somewhere above the bridge of the nose. It means gauging the attitude of students toward the material, assessing the level of their understanding, trying to figure out *how* as well as *what* they think about a particular topic. It means refusing to respond too quickly, or perfunctorily, just to keep the conversation flowing.

It seems useful to recall that one "conducts" a seminar. The analogy with a musical conductor is appropriate and instructive. The subject of the seminar (and the texts or problems being considered) forms a kind of score; the students will already have, with greater or lesser degrees of success, mastered that score before coming to class. The expectation is, in fact, that they will have prepared for class by reading the material, by thinking up something to say. The work of the conductor is to draw out this intellectual music, to arrange it, set the tempo of play. Imagine an orchestra, if you will, *without* a conductor. There would be no pace, no emphasis, no interpretation. A group of students meeting to discuss, say, *Hamlet* without a seminar leader would meander and digress. There would be no teasing out of Hamlet's motives, or the motives of his mother and her husband. There might well be no highlighting of important themes, motifs, symbolic patterns.

A seminar invariably reflects the personality of the one who "conducts" the class. I take that for granted. But a good seminar will also reflect the personality of the students. I begin every seminar these days with this preface: "This seminar is not about me. It's about you. The success or failure of the class will rest on your shoulders as well as mine. The only thing I expect of you when you walk into this room is, well, everything. I want your heart and mind at this table."

Over the years, I've learned how to pace a seminar. It is always useful to have one or two vivid questions in mind for the class to "answer" in the course of each session, and to give them to students in advance. I often end a class by saying: "Next time we'll be thinking about X. Why is it that this or that is so? How can we be sure?" I give students specific assignments, and work to "conduct" the class through the allotted time, drawing all -- or most -- students into discussion, cutting off digressions when they seem unrelated to the main line of argument, questioning students when they say things that are either unclear or perhaps unfounded.

A great scholar like Fraenkel was, I suspect, rarely mistaken about the meaning of a passage, although even he was open to being "corrected," as he said. For my part, I'm quite often wrong about things and expect students to "correct" me frequently. I put the notion forward that we must all risk making statements, based on hunches. The work of the group is to refine those formulations, to move steadily toward greater understanding, more accurate statements.

When students come to class unprepared, I avoid shaming them as a matter of principle, but I'm not against making them feel the burden of their inaction. "John, I see that you haven't read Frost's 'The Oven Bird' very closely," I might say. "Otherwise, you could not imagine it is a poem about a Thanksgiving turkey." Humor, as ever, makes criticism more palatable. I have rarely found students willing to come to class and be chided again about their lack of preparation. I will often give them a special assignment for the next session; they will "lead us off," I always say. Students come alive in a seminar when they find themselves talking and making judgments that their peers, and their

professor, find sensible or interesting. It is always possible to lead them forward as they begin to make new connections, begin to "find" themselves as thoughtful persons who can express and question ideas.

There is no substitute for preparation, as everyone who has ever led a seminar must realize. The teacher must have a deep and passionate knowledge of the material, be aware of the relevant scholarship and competing approaches to the subject. Making complex knowledge available to students, modeling critical thinking, can be intimidating to them; but it's worth it. I hope my students come away from a seminar understanding that I have been genuinely moved by the material, and that certain standards -- certain *values*
-- are involved in making judgments. I like to be very frank and honest, explain why certain poems, for example, have been crucial in my emotional as well as intellectual development as a person. And as a member of the community of scholars.

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