CONVERSATION

RETHINKING THE GRADUATE SEMINAR*

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One of the goals of sociology graduate programs is to produce graduate students who can speak about and teach a broad range of sociological topics. While training in specialized areas comes largely from activities outside the classroom (such as the Master’s thesis, Ph.D. dissertation, major exams, and mentoring experiences), general training occurs in a series of required seminars known as “area” or “core” seminars, which focus on a particular substantive field within sociology. Given the importance of producing graduate students who are knowledgeable in diverse areas within sociology, and that the vast majority of academic positions available to graduates are at teaching colleges or universities where faculty members generally teach in several substantive areas (Howery 1995), surprisingly little attention has been paid to the teaching of these graduate seminars.

Most of the available literature on this topic focuses on discussion methods and is written with teaching undergraduates in mind. The majority of these works analyze whether class discussion should comprise a fundamental part of undergraduate education. Many list methods for engendering discussion in the classroom (Frederick 1981; Gullette 1992; Worsley 1975) or suggest alternative models to the traditional lecture course (Adriance 1982; McBroom and Reed 1994). One of the primary issues in this field is how the structure of the classroom (lecture or discussion) shapes the roles of the instructor and students.

In a well-known article on this subject, Finkel and Monk (1983) argue that most undergraduate teachers carry all the burden and responsibility of the course on their shoulders despite overwhelming evidence that collective work is a key ingredient to intellectual growth. The reason for this, the authors argue, is that both parties have been socialized to accept stereotypical roles of teachers and students. The instructors assume the role of expert while the students settle into their seats to take in their illuminating words. The dissolution of the “Atlas complex,” as Finkel and Monk call it, involves creating a course format that focuses teachers’ attention on their course as a social system. This involves allotting portions of the course material and tasks to students who then assume responsibility for digesting the material and imparting it to other students. In this sense, students learn as much from each other as from the instructor.

While such literature on teaching sociology to undergraduates has burgeoned over the past 20 years and while most professors acknowledge the vast difference between teaching undergraduates and graduates, there remains only minimal amounts of work on teaching graduate students. This lack of attention to such a central element in graduate training stems from two commonly held myths.¹ The first is that graduate stu-

¹There is also, of course, a structural reason for this. The people who are teaching graduate students work at research universities, which often de-emphasize teaching. Furthermore, any

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students are naturally motivated to learn and therefore professors expend little effort in designing interesting, innovative ways of presenting and discussing material. The second myth is that graduate classes are relatively unimportant in terms of what graduate students learn in graduate school.

We would address this second myth by noting that while classes may not be the most important part of a graduate education, faculty members clearly see value in seminars because they require them. Coursework dominates students’ time and energy during the first two years of graduate school. 2 This effort should be directed through carefully planned and executed courses. While the bulk of professional socialization and specialized knowledge may develop outside the classroom, students should leave graduate school with a broad knowledge base, developed through area seminars.

The main topic in this article is student motivation. We argue that, due in part to an assumption that graduate students are self-motivated to learn everything sociological, professors who teach area seminars often fail to play a central role in structuring the class and neglect innovative teaching techniques designed to spark students’ interest in the material. We do not wish to suggest that professors bear the entire burden for creating a stimulating class. We acknowledge the responsibility of graduate students to play an active role in class sessions. However, we believe that professors are better equipped than graduate students, particularly those in the beginning stages of their programs, to create an atmosphere for academic discourse to grow. By failing to think about how to teach the material and focusing instead on which material to teach, professors fail to provide the structure necessary for such discourse and do not effectively transmit the course’s body of knowledge.

GRADUATE SEMINAR FORMATS: A CLASSIFICATION AND CRITIQUE

Graduate courses can be differentiated by how the professor controls the flow of information. In some graduate courses, the professor is entirely responsible for presenting material, while in others, students complete this task. Most courses fall somewhere between these two extremes. We will describe four models for graduate seminars: the lecture format, the professor-led discussion format, the student-led discussion format, and the read-and-present format. Then we will describe some drawbacks of each model.

The lecture format relies primarily on the instructor for the dissemination of course content. In this format, the professor limits interaction with students to answering questions or responding to concerns raised by the material. Lecture courses teach a body of knowledge to students, rather than enabling them to assess or critique the material.

The disadvantages of the lecture format stem from the fact that the professor occupies a much larger role than the students vis-a-vis the course material. As a result, students participate minimally, provide few comments or observations, and rely on the professor to define and explain the important aspects of the material. This method has numerous drawbacks. First, this format does not train graduate students to engage in academic discourse. Because students are not given opportunity to express their thoughts orally, they are hindered from academic conversation. This format also encourages students to blindly accept the ideas presented to them. This is not to say that the professor can not challenge the material during a lecture, nor that students cannot raise objections. This format, however, does not lend itself to such activity. Since critical thinking is essential to good academic discourse, this format does not achieve the objectives of an effective graduate seminar.
The professor-led discussion format is the most common graduate seminar. It teaches students the material and examines their understanding of the course by requiring them to discuss ideas and develop reactions to readings. Typically, the professor raises provocative questions about the readings and manages the ensuing interchanges. The professor's ability to plan an agenda of questions to reach explicit goals for the discussion plays an important part in the effectiveness of this format. Clearly, the professor's management of the discussion relates to the clarity of his or her goals for the session. Instructors with a specific list of topics they want to discuss will be more likely to recognize tangential discussions and keep the conversation moving towards the goals of the course.

While the professor-led discussion format corrects many of the shortcomings mentioned in the lecture format, it has its own set of problems. Students often describe discussions as unfocused and poorly led. Questions are either too general or too specific. For example, a professor who asks, "Who can tell me what this book is about?" will likely receive few comments. This question is so general that students may not know where to begin. A more focused question leads to meaningful and constructive discussion. Questions that are too specific can be problematic as well, resulting in answers rather than discussion (Welty 1989). A lack of focus means that the professor does not provide any meaningful conclusion or reiteration of the main points of the discussion. As a result, students often find the material disorganized and fragmented.

In a student-based discussion format, the professor assigns students to lead different class sessions. Naturally, the responsibility of the students will vary. In some cases, the professor asks a student to bring several questions about the readings to class. After the student presents his or her questions, the professor manages the discussion. In other cases, the professor provides a brief overview of the material before the student takes over. Alternately, the student leads and manages the discussion, and the professor takes a passive role.

Student-led discussions suffer from problems similar to professor-led discussions. However, in many cases, these problems become exaggerated. The careful planning and leading of a discussion that covers not only the main points of the material, but also places the material within an academic context, is best done with the involvement of the professor. Students who are unfamiliar with the substantive area can not determine the pivotal points in the readings and connect them together into a meaningful framework. This does not mean that professors must lead discussions, but it does suggest that some form of guidance is appropriate.

Finally, the read and present format places the professor in the most passive role. The professor has a list of articles on the syllabus for each week of the course. Each student signs up for a different article to read and gives a brief, in-class presentation that summarizes its objectives and findings. The professor merely chooses the next person to present. Typically, this format leaves little time for discussion or comments because presentations must move quickly to allow everyone a chance to summarize their article.

We consider the read and present format to be the least beneficial for graduate students. This format fragments the material by placing one student in charge of each reading and does not form connections between readings. Time management issues are regularly a problem. Students who present material at the beginning of class often go into great detail, while those presenting at the end of class get shortchanged. This situation is understandably frustrating for both the students who want to leave class on time and those who spend considerable time preparing only to find themselves being cut short.

**AUTHORITY IN GRADUATE SEMINARS**

The primary problem we see with seminar courses is the failure of instructors to play a central role in structuring the class (except
in the case of the lecture format). Sociology graduate seminars facilitate between two extremes of professorial authority. Either the professor assumes total control of the classroom by directly presenting material, as in the lecture format, or the instructor fades into the background in an attempt to let students run the seminar. Clearly the issue of authority in graduate-level seminars is a thorny one. As O'Brien and Howard (1996) note, instructors are reluctant to assume the central role of authority in the classroom. In fact, instructors often attempt to symbolically “remove” themselves from the classroom by providing dispassionate, “value-neutral” overviews of the material (O'Brien and Howard 1996:327).

A likely contributing factor to the reluctance of instructors to take active control in graduate seminars is their perception of the differences between undergraduate and graduate education. As Sullivan (1991) notes, graduate and undergraduate programs have different goals. The goal of undergraduate education is to reproduce knowledge. The goal of graduate education is to produce knowledge (Sullivan 1991:408). Sullivan suggests that graduate programs create a smooth transition between the goals of undergraduate and graduate education by “gradually increasing the autonomy on the part of the students” (p. 408). Thus, graduate students should progress from highly structured courses, to more highly specialized seminars and workshops, and finally to independent research. In such a model, instructors train students to accept a greater amount of classroom authority.

Unfortunately, little evidence exists to show that sociology departments follow Sullivan's model. In our experience, sociology graduate seminars do not operate differently for experienced and new graduate students. While sociology departments offer seminars like Sociological Theory and area overviews for new graduate students, professors structure these like the upper-level courses. Instructors who maintain little control over seminar discussions tend to do so in both their introductory and more advanced seminars.

Since many sociology graduate students enter the field from other disciplines, a lack of active instructor involvement in early seminars hinders a new graduate student's ability to learn the material. Students often lack the framework necessary to analyze the material. Students must complete the assigned readings without guidelines or background information that would make the material intelligible. Because of this lack of guidance from instructors, many graduate students' contributions keep discussions focused on low levels of learning (Bloom et al. 1956). While the instructors and more knowledgeable graduate students may try to advance the discussion above recall to the levels of synthesis, critique, and analysis, much of the class can not participate due to inadequate preparation at the lower levels.

Contrary to a common assumption of many instructors, our successful seminars have always involved active participation from the instructor. Many instructors want to remove themselves from discussion and allow students free reign. While this style of discussion management stems from a noble attempt to allow students a strong voice and to include divergent perspectives, a passive instructor generally leads to unfocused discussion. The best seminars involve an instructor with a clear goal and outline for the discussion (Welty 1989). After all, some of the best interchanges occur when students actively disagree with the instructor and attempt to bolster their arguments using course materials. In fact, in their recent discussion of authority in the classroom, O'Brien and Howard (1996) suggest that the instructor’s reluctance to take an active role in the classroom undermines the ability of students to critique the material:

Ironically, the reluctance to assume conscious responsibility for one’s authority as an instructor undermines students’ attempts to engage and challenge the material; it is difficult to debate an indeterminate, external authority that claims no position on the material under consideration. In an environment of reified objectivity it is not possible for students to learn how
one does arrive at responsible, subjective points of view. (P. 328)

AN EXAMPLE OF AN EFFECTIVE SEMINAR FORMAT

Instructors of graduate seminars must take an active role in organizing and managing seminar discussions. In particular, the instructor should have clear goals for the session and be willing to bring a discussion back to the task at hand if it veers too far off course. Clear goals for class discussion are beneficial in several ways. First, the instructor can provide guidelines to issues that students should focus on while they read. In addition to reading guidelines, the instructor should provide a short summary of the material at the beginning of class. In our experience, a summary refreshes students’ memories, raises potential issues for the discussion, and reminds students of the issues in the text that are relevant to the discussion. Second, clear goals allow the professor to formulate pointed questions that require detailed responses. Pointed questions lead to a more lively debate than general questions of the “what do you think about this” variety. With a clear outline, the professor will have an easier time stopping tangents before they derail the discussion. By clarifying that certain topics and goals exist for the class, the professor can politely comment that a certain line of discussion is moving away from the task at hand. A final benefit of clear discussion goals is that the professor can provide a summary of the discussion as well as the issues that the class raised.

In this section, we offer an example of an effective graduate seminar. We have designed an example of a discussion that would be led by the professor, but it would quickly engage graduate students. We have chosen to focus on the discussion format because we feel that the lecture and the read and present formats are ineffective. The former does not train students to engage in academic discourse, and the latter provides graduate students with a fragmented picture of a substantive field.

One way to create a meaningful discussion is to build it from the ground up. The development of questions follow the levels of learning.3 This framework, which follows the levels of learning laid out in Bloom et al.'s Taxonomy (1956), contains strategies for combating many of the difficulties mentioned earlier, while maintaining the possibility of achieving high levels of discourse.

1. Begin with questions that ask students to simply recall the substance of the material they have read. Such questions involve laying out the basic argument, or identifying the basic issues addressed by the author(s). By laying out the substance of the material at the beginning of the discussion, the professor ensures that students have a foundation and can then move to higher levels of discussion. Questions at this level are typically of the who, what, when, and where variety.

2. Once the substantive groundwork has been laid, the discussion can turn to questions that explore students’ comprehension of the material. Comprehension questions ask students to generalize from the material, or to explore the material on a slightly higher level of abstraction. These are typically how and why questions.

3. The third stage in the discussion develops questions of analysis, which encourage students to explore the assumptions in an author’s argument and to think about the implications of the argument for other substantive topics. These questions address assumptions and implications of the material.

4. Finally, the discussion can move to evaluation and synthesis of the material, encouraging students to explore the validity of the argument and its

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3We are indebted to Debra Friedman for introducing us to this method of constructing effective discussions.
effects. These questions address ramifications of the material.

We illustrate this framework with an example of the type of discussion that could occur in an area seminar course on deviance and social control. In this example, students have read Gottfredson and Hirschi’s recent book *A General Theory of Crime* (1990), which suggests that individuals engage in criminal behavior because they have low self-control. The discussion that follows begins by asking students to lay out the theory and then moves through levels of thinking to a point where students critique the theory.

(1) What do the authors mean by low self-control? (Define the term.) What is the link between low self-control and crime? (Lay out their basic argument.)

(2) Why do Gottfredson and Hirschi claim that their theory can account for both criminal and non-criminal behavior? (Take students deep into the argument. Ask them to explore the generalizations inherent in the theory.)

(3) How is the authors’ argument similar to or different from Hirschi’s earlier control theory? (Ask students to explore the assumptions underlying each theory and the implications of both.)

(4) Is the general theory of crime really a “general” theory? What might it not explain? (Ask students to think critically about the theory.)

Constructing questions that move through these levels of analysis is not a simple task. The easiest questions to write, and those most frequently appearing in seminars, are recall and evaluation questions. The problems come when the conversation remains at the level of recall, frustrating those students who are more advanced in their understanding. Then when the discussion immediately jumps to the level of evaluation, it leaves students confused. By moving methodically through the levels of learning, a professor can ensure that he or she gets the maximum number of students involved in the conversation. Finally, we believe that this kind of carefully crafted discussion provides students with an excellent model of argumentation and encourages thoughtful and complete academic work.

**CONCLUSION**

Our primary objective in this paper is to encourage active discussion and debate about the classroom education of graduate students. The task of teaching students to produce rather than to reproduce knowledge is difficult. The discipline needs more discussion and research to guide instructors through this challenge. This piece represents a preliminary attempt to identify some of the issues involved in teaching graduate students and to suggest some potential strategies for addressing these topics. We contend that, by deliberately accepting their authority in a seminar setting, instructors will become better at training graduate students to engage in academic discussions.

**REFERENCES**


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