

The culture of seminars or *What's in it for me?*

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Could you talk about seminar culture and the ongoing reviewing of each other as participants that is taking place there, and how these processes may relate to quality and knowledge development?



My starting points

- Our bodies and the close human practices they are integrated in
 - both emotionally and intellectually –are equally important for academic scholarship as adding to the publications forming the symbolic frontier of research in the Web of Science.
- Two ways to describe the academic career and the professional knowledge that underpins it:
 - Sharp and specialised to research and the scientific contribution.
Institutionally independent,
 - Broad academic scholarship, integrated and partly dependent on the institutional environment.



Actual practice of seminars?

Polarisation:

- Institutional offering, add-on  Important collegiate endeavour?

Ideal:

- The seminar constitutes the core of a collegially created knowledge culture both for teaching and research in the institution.

Two questions to ponder:

- *What's in it for me?*
- *What's in it for the university?*



Are seminars important?

- Events described as seminars are scheduled with outspoken or implicit expectations that both doctoral students and other academics voluntarily will attend.
- If they do...
- Complains of weakening attendance at seminars, especially from doctoral students, are common among academics.
- *Why are seminar practices difficult to uphold though they are regarded as fundamental?*



Three broad social practices in academia:

Lectures, seminars and peer-reviews

The seminar is from my perspective the trickier and the most dangerous one since its nature is to some degree both informal and unpredictable.

But also, perhaps, the most central...



General social practices in academic work

<i>LECTURE</i>	<i>SEMINAR</i>	<i>PEER-REVIEW</i>
Presenting intellectual content	Processing intellectual content	Judging intellectual content
Focussed purpose	Open purpose	Evaluative purpose
Content: -preplanned	Content: Starting point for understanding/probing/creating	Content: Starting point for understanding and judging
Targeted audience	Voluntary/invited participants	Chosen members
Individual gain	Collegial/individual gain	Collegial/individual gain as side- effect
In teaching: Outcomes assessed and reported	Invisible outcomes	Outcomes reported



Academic social practices

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The practice of seminars is hard to grasp in its vast variation – and the outcomes of seminars are quite elusive.

Partly rooted in the fact that the outcome of most seminars is orally generated, quite invisible and disappear afterwards.



What makes a seminar a seminar?

- From my perspective - the heart of the seminar is kind of emerging virtual knowledge structure.
- It has a temporal, flexible structure with a complex and hierarchical character.
- It emerges through dialogue among a group of people.
- Exploration, integration and judgement in service of the whole is the mode of the process.



Sank-ta Lu. ci-a ljus. kla. ra någ- ring sprid i vår vin- ter- natt
 Kom i din vi- ta skrud huld med din ma- ning skänk oss du ju- lers brud

glans av din fåg- ring Dröm- mar av ving- e- sus under oss si-
 jul- fröj- ders a- ning

Tänd di- na vi- ta ljus Sankta Lu. ci- a Sankta Lu. ci- a

The possibility to momentarily generate mutual knowledge, initially rooted in each participants understandings of the topic at hand, which, during the dialogue in the group is made more coherent and complex - **but only partly explicit.**

You have to trust it to be able to use it.



I think seminars are expressions of how the institutional culture guards and value the kind of intellectual work and scholarship that the environment encompasses.



Common species of seminars

- Lecture-like presentations leaving only five minutes at the end for questions and comments
- Critical peer-reviews - avoiding the exploration and immediately turning to a judgement from the local authority: Wait for what the professor will say!
- Both may be valuable in their own way, but makes it hard for the real music to find its form...



Doctoral students & real seminars

- When a group of doctoral students take part in several seminars, and present their work for each other, a collegiate network develops.
- It might foster, harbour, and underpin the quality of all the PhD-projects that the group work with. But it also includes feelings like envy, competition, friendship, and anxiety.
- In each seminar, the virtual knowledge structure depends on the contributions from the participants and the floating judgement necessary for the richness and coherence of the outcome.
- This will (unintentionally) form a kind of *informal* intellectual hierarchy, in which some students will be more important for the emerging knowledge culture and perhaps affect the directions of other students PhD-work more than others.



This hierarchy is a normal part of academic life. Seniors tend to hide this kind of influence behind formal positions.

However, it is a deeper question of what kind of knowledge and academic scholarship we strive for.



So why attend seminars that are not immediately and specifically useful?

That depends on what kind of academic scholar you want to become.

And what kind of professional environment you want the university to offer in the future.





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