Chapter III
The Online Seminar as Enacted Practice

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ABSTRACT

The academic seminar can be seen as the core of university culture. In a seminar, claims to knowledge – presented in an essay and/or orally – are critically scrutinised and subjected to further articulation. The point of this chapter is to report on attempts to develop critical features of seminar culture in the online context. The basic premise is that participation in seminar activities has to be learned through experience. For the participant with little prior experience of online textual discussions, the online seminar introduces an unfamiliar learning situation in which organisational as well as cognitive and communicative issues must be attended to explicitly. In order to illustrate the attempts to socialise students into this kind of discourse communities, we use a Masters course for mature students as a case. It is pointed out that students must be involved in the activities of establishing a community with rapport between members and with an understanding of how to conduct the interaction. By giving the students responsibility for solving a range of practical problems and letting them help each other, we induce them into the status of legitimate online participants. Several issues are important to attend to in the building of such collaboration such as balancing increasing independence of students with a clear leadership and focus of the activities. It is argued that the face-to-face seminar and the online seminar may fulfil complementary roles, but in both cases learning how to contribute is essential.

INTRODUCTION

A prominent feature of university culture is the development of knowledge in collaboration with others. The most significant context for this is, has been and will continue to be, the academic seminar, which in its institutional form dates back to Antiquity. In the seminar, the participants present and scrutinise ideas, arguments and claims regarding the state of knowledge in some field. Through focussed discussions the validity and legitimacy of what is argued are subjected to public and critical scrutiny. In its traditional institutional form, the seminar is an oral event where participants contribute and react *in situ* to the contributions of others. Often the seminar discussion is based on a written document or essay, where the argumentation is presented. In a profound sense, this mode of presenting and debating claims to knowledge may be seen as the core of the concept of knowledge in a democratic and open society.

Traditionally the participants in a seminar have met in a seminar room under the leadership of a professor or lecturer acting as moderator. In cases where the seminar also includes formal examination of the text/essay presented, the moderator might require at least some contribution from each participant; active participation is often a formal requirement for passing a course. Even though seminars constitute the core of what learning in a university should be like, it is important not be naïve about the state of seminar culture in many contexts. For instance, in times of mass-education limited resources make it difficult, sometimes impossible, to develop and maintain the quality of seminar culture. There are not enough qualified teachers or enough time for such activities. On many occasions the participants, students and scholars, either have not read what is required, or they attend just to listen to an interesting discussion without necessarily intending to contribute in an active manner.

Online academic seminars may be seen as a new institutional, communicative and technical context for continuing this long tradition of formulating and critically scrutinising knowledge. The new format introduces new premises for communicating, and it offers some positive features as well as some potential hazards to learning. In our Masters courses at the IT University of Gothenburg, we have attempted to develop attitudes and skills to learning that build on the traditions of the academic seminar, but which take into account the new circumstances.

The purpose of this chapter is to outline the characteristics of the online seminar in order to give an account of the genesis and development of online discussions under the specific conditions of mandatory participation, and where the outcome of the activities is a grade for the participant. We will discuss some findings about how online seminars function in comparison to the traditional (f2f) seminar. More specifically, we will discuss the following issues: how rapport is established, what instructions are given to participants, how instructions are interpreted and put into practice, and how productive discussions may be sustained. These aspects concern the structural features of online discussions. There are also cognitive features of online seminars to pay attention to. The crucial issues here are how the participants understand the issues under discussion, and how their insights develop during the time they participate.

By mapping the specific features, structural (low level issues) and cognitive (high level issues), of the online seminar, we will discuss what the advantages are, what might be problematic, and what might be common to the two kinds of contexts for seminar work.

BACKGROUND

Modern information technology allows for running distance courses fully online (Bates,

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