

## THE SYMINAR

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The following remarks define a particular type of seminar. This type of seminar, called a syminar, is the kind of seminar which will be most useful to the student.

When it is playing a role in medical education not fulfilled by some other teaching device, the seminar functions best. Seminars acquire their singular position by cultivating in the student the phenomenon of fact-appreciation or fact control. The phrase 'fact-control' (or fact appreciation) encompasses one's knowledge about a fact, not just an awareness of it. Such knowledge about a fact includes its importance, its context, its relevance and the skill of knowing when and how to use it. Like many abstractions, the concept of fact control can be best understood by understanding its antithesis, which in this case would be a fact- out-of-control. Take the example: You are milling around the door of an examination hall. In five minutes you will enter to write your final in hematology. Suddenly some pseudo-enlightened member of the class storms up to you and asks, "Did you know that there are 0.25 micrograms of Vitamin B<sub>12</sub> per gram of dry weight in the adrenal gland of the average 70 kgm. human male?"

Now clearly, the above situation is absurd. Even the learners of irrelevant material wouldn't bother assigning importance to facts like that one. Yet this is an obvious situation in which a fact has careened out of control in the student's mind. He has surely given it undeserved importance, by forgetting its context and its relevance. He doesn't know when nor how that fact is used. He doesn't appreciate it.

All of our previous experience in learning has taught that the very best way to develop skill, motor or mental, in using a fact, is to do just that, use it. Incorrect usage will lead

to an error, with hopefully, subsequent correction. Unimportant facts eventually assume a low position in the hierarchy of our memory. We forget them. As the relationships between facts gradually become apparent, so does the relative importance of these relationships. In summary, we develop experience with the facts we have memorized, thus acquiring the art of utilizing our knowledge, which is A. N. Whitehead's definition of education. Ultimately, our behaviour, through our knowledge, is changed, and we have learned (since to learn is to change one's behaviour).

The preceding observations, however, simply serve to emphasize the difference between the recollection of a fact, on one hand, and the utilization of it, or the development of fact-control, on the other. The seminar can be an excellent experience in learning fact-control. Feedback on whatever an individual says is offered by other members of the group, with the ultimate opinion coming from the most experienced and educated member of the group, the teacher. For example, in a seminar on chromosomal anomalies, a student might recollect, by himself, the fact that Mongols often have simian palmar creases. This fact would be considered and evaluated by the seminar group. That non-Mongols can also have simian creases, and that Mongols may have normal skin creases, would eventually come to the group's attention. The student who had originally raised the subject would have developed a truer appreciation of this phenomenon than if he was merely capable of recollecting it. By providing feedback on his original point, the seminar group has also learned.

The seminar method as described is only successful, however, when every student present participates. A non-participant observer becomes merely the passive recipient of the others' statements. In a sense, such a

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passive observer is being lectured, and the seminar method is an inefficient way to receive a lecture.

Essentially three variables determine maximal participation in a seminar: group size, the experience of the teacher, and preparation. In groups larger than about eight to ten, failure of some of the attendants to participate is almost guaranteed. An experienced teacher plays many roles in the seminar. He knows how to vary the complexity of the discussion, and thereby accommodates wits of all calibre. Some students always tend to be more aggressive. Others naturally fall into a passive role. The seasoned conductor of this student orchestra is aware of these volume differences, and compensates by encouraging diffident students, while suppressing the perpetual fountains of knowledge. Students, unconsciously of course, often tend to get off the main theme. The conductor must determine whether these diversions contribute or detract from the desired effect.

Lastly, participation is directly proportional to preparation, except when students attempt to pool their ignorance. The student must be motivated to prepare. This interest depends on many factors, some beyond influence, but the teacher can offer a major stimulant. He can limit the required reading to "core" knowledge. Core knowledge seems to be found most often in lecture notes. If notes were handed out, then later discussed to develop appreciation of the facts in them, our education might be more stimulating, efficient, effective. Professorial hair generally stands on end when the subject of handouts is introduced. Such a practice, they claim, amounts to spoon-feeding. But they fail to see that such feeding is merely a device which subserves the students' opportunity to use the memorized facts in a seminar. The student thereby acquires some fact-appreciation of his core knowledge. This form of mental nutrition improves on the distasteful habit of dictating notes, lecture

after lecture, to an anorexic audience, who regurgitates everything back on the exam, without having digested it in the least.

Also consider that a seminar as described above is not a device to be used in every medical school course, nor even always in some courses. Malleable, non-dogmatic subject matter lends itself well to this technique. The spontaneity and educational value of bull-sessions on politics, religion, sexual mores, and the encyclical on the pill is familiar to us all. One somehow has less to say about the Kneib's cycle. Besides the nature of the subject matter, other variables such as time and the ratio of staff to students will determine the usefulness of the seminar in particular situations. Clinical clerks, for example, can use the seminar to great effect, since one resident often deals with only a few students, core knowledge is already learned, and the subject in discussion, often treatment, lends itself to a bull-session atmosphere. In this healthy intellectual environment, the fourth-year student readily cultivates fact-control and appreciation.

The type of seminar described above can be called a "syminar" because "sym" is derived from the Greek meaning together, as a symposium literally means a drinking together. The work syminar, therefore, emphasizes participation.

A syminar's success depends on:

- previous core knowledge
- participation
- small groups
- a talented conductor
- discussion of varying complexity
- knowing when not to use it,

all ultimately nurturing the development of fact-control. As soon as one of these requisites for a healthy syminar is ignored, the session will quickly degenerate into a lecture, a small-group discussion, or a tutoring session.

*The progress of rivers to the sea is not as rapid as that of man to error.*

*Voltaire*



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