

The Seminar

By Michael Kahn

Why do you come to college? It has never seemed reasonable to me that one comes to college because of the professors. If the professors have anything important to say, it can be mimeographed and mailed to you back home in Redding. Nor can I believe you come here for the books. They too can be mailed to Redding. It seems to me the only reasons worth coming here for is each other. I believe that you are each other's most important resource along the path of this educational journey.

Robert Hutchins called college "the great continuing conversation." The idea was, of course, that it made no sense for all of you to sit silently side by side in the library or the lecture hall being "taught" by the books and the faculty, but rather that college was an opportunity to engage in a fantastic dialogue, triologue, multilogue with a fantastically varied assortment of consciousness. The books and the lectures were to be the material from which such conversation was launched. Professors were to be expert in facilitating such conversation till you got on to the knack of it and could fly on your own. You had to come here because this is where the other seekers were gathered and where all those extraordinary conversations could be had.

Hutchins was a good student of Plato, and as such, believed that the professors didn't have anything to teach anyway; he believed that it's all in you already and only requires a nurturing environment to emerge into your consciousness. The main component of that environment is the presence of other people similarly searching within themselves for the understanding.

It's a decidedly interpersonal theory of learning. The strong statement of it says that reading and learning alone are like making love alone. At the very least, reading and learning much happen in the context of imaginary interaction, and for most of us that is so hard as to be nearly impossible. Therefore, we need to talk to people about what we're reading and what we're thinking and wondering about. Not just listen as in a lecture, but listen and talk in a real interaction.

And so long ago, I suppose in most civilizations, the seminar was born. It was a beautiful invention built on the premise that a teacher wasn't necessary, that all that was necessary was for peers to gather in seriousness (which certainly didn't preclude joyfulness and playfulness) and friendliness. It was born as a way of education, which told us we were capable of learning from our peers and of teaching our peers and that we were not empty little vessels into which learning had to be poured. It became not just a way of education, but a way of life as well. If we think of the seminar as not only a formal class bearing that name, but rather as the interaction in which two or more people try to build an idea together, we see we're talking about a good many life situations. Whenever you and your roommate talk about a movie, whenever a group of your friends try to make sense out of the American political scene, whenever you walk out of a lecture with a neighbor talking about some part of it, you are, or could be, seminarizing.

I don't know how it was in all the other civilizations that invented the seminar, but in our own culture there are difficulties. We are taught modes of discourse in just

growing up that don't work well in seminars. For one thing we are taught that ideas are right or wrong. We are taught that there are smart and stupid ways to look at a book or a movie or a lecture. We are taught to worry about the merits of our contribution relative to the others in the discussion. We are also taught to see conversation as struggle. We learn to struggle or never to get our own thought into the conversation. All of these modes, which are so thoroughly absorbed by most of us, make idea-discussing very difficult indeed.

We do other things all right. It's possible to get into a debate; it's dismayingly easy to get into an argument. Also you can usually find someone to tell your thoughts to, though he is apt to be not so much listening as he is waiting to tell you his thoughts. But discussion is hard when right/wrong and win/lost are operating. The result is that there isn't as much discussion on most campuses as there might be. And since there isn't, about the only available educational resources are the books and the professors.

But if we could ever learn to seminar...

If we ever could...

If we could learn to seminar -- just learn it, the way you would learn to play the guitar or speak French...

If we could learn it we could change the whole game. We could turn a campus into a wonderful collection of resources, peers who would alternate between being each other's students and each other's teachers. It would mean that whenever we felt like being into the life of the mind it would not be necessary or even necessarily desirable to seek out a professor -- any group of interested friends who could be gotten into conversation would do. Any single interested persons would do. It would change the way we related around movies and books and politics. It would introduce a whole new conversational power into our lives. And that power would not be just for college. We would have it for the rest of our lives. It would mean that for the rest of our lives we would gather friends who have read the same book, seen the same movie, voted in the same election, and discuss with them. Discuss with them instead of arguing or engaging in what nursery school teachers call parallel play. It does seem worth exploring.

My colleagues and I who have been working at this problem for several years now believe that learning to seminar isn't all that hard. There are a few principles to be noted, and those coupled with some goodwill can produce a powerful seminar. We have found that once right/wrong can be replaced with interest in different views and curiosity about the relation between those different views, it takes no unusual skill or intelligence to build an idea together. We have found that once win/lose can be replaced with pleasure in the other participants' collegueship, it does not take loving saints to turn the seminar from a battleground into an enjoyable playing field. It's a game anyone can play.

For some years now several of us have been trying to learn how to seminar and how to create an environment where a seminar may happen. We are only in the beginning stages of this enterprise; however, we have a beginning and I would like to

share that with you in the hope that it will enrich your seminar experience in this course.

We think there are four kinds of seminars. We have named them the FREE-FOR-ALL, the BEAUTY CONTEST, the DISTINGUISHED HOUSE TOUR, and the BARN-RAISING. We think they go in that order toward being richer and richer styles of intellectual conversation.

1. The FREE-FOR-ALL: There is a prize out there in the middle of the floor. It may be the instructor's approval or it may be one's own self-esteem, but it's there and the goal is to win it and anything goes -- elbows, knees, gouging, anything. You win by looking not just smart, but by looking smarter. And that means it's just as important to make them look dumb as to make you look smart.
2. The BEAUTY CONTEST: This is the seminar in which I parade my idea to you in bathing suit and high heels seeking your admiration. When it's off the runway I go to the dressing room and get ready for my next appearance while you're parading your idea. Of course, I'm not paying any attention to yours.
3. The DISTINGUISHED HOUSE TOUR: (In most cities you can sign up for these. They put you in a bus and take you to a stately home that's a good example of Edwardian architecture and furniture. The hosts have spruced it all up for your visit; they show you through and explain it all to you and you ask questions. Then you get back into the bus and go look at another house, say one that is a good example of Georgian architecture...) In the seminar this model goes similarly. Someone advances an idea. The rest of the seminar spends some time exploring her house. They ask questions, they explore for inconsistencies, they try hard to understand the idea. When they have got a good grasp on it one of the other members offers another idea. It may be a whole different point of view on the same subject. The seminar members, including the first hostess, then explore that house. The houses are not compared nor does one person claim hers is better. They are thought to be interesting houses in their own right and each worth exploring. This is a high form of discourse and is apt to produce a good seminar. It also has some problems, as we will see.
4. The BARN RAISING: In frontier America when a family needed a barn and had limited labor and other resources, the entire community gathered to help them build the barn. The original family described the idea, the kind of barn they had in mind, picked the site, and the community pitched in and built it. Often the neighbors would suggest changes and improvements as they are built...

I would like to tell you a bit of history about how we discovered that the DISTINGUISHED HOUSE TOUR wasn't as high as we were going to get, although we had once thought it was. We were reading Lao-tze, the Book of the Tao, and one very young student said, "I think that Lao-tze's way is a neat way to live -- just going along minding your own business, not trying to tell other people how to live, not trying to organize the world, just looking after your own garden." So one of the faculty members present, with a friendly helpful smile on his face, turned to her and said, "Yeah, but what do you do when you pass a house where a mother is starving a baby to death?" Now she hadn't been in very many seminars, she hadn't read the

kind of book before, and that was all she needed to collapse into a heap and say, "Oh, yeah, I guess I didn't think it out very well." We didn't see her again for the rest of the day. Everyone in the seminar felt terrible.

We invented the verb "socratease" to describe the asking of friendly questions, which show the holes in a person's idea, and we realized that she had been badly socrateased.

As we explored this further we learned an important thing; we learned that it's not just the young and the shy that find defending or explaining a position lonely and stressful. It's lonely and stressful for almost anyone. It's lonely and stressful for me to have the pressure of the seminar on me when I'm trying to explore a new idea. At best it's like being a witness in a trial, and at worst it's like an inquisition. It's not a situation calculated to bring out my best thinking.

Those are the four kinds of seminar we observed. No seminar is a pure case; they all go through periods of fitting into each of the categories. And sometimes they are unclassifiable. It seems to me that the goal for most seminars is to spend as little time as possible being stuck in FREE-FOR-ALL and BEAUTY CONTEST, and as much time as possible in DISTINGUISHED HOUSE TOUR and BARN-RAISING, preferable the latter.

Out of all this has emerged a way of thinking about the seminar. It isn't the only possible conception, of course, but it is one that so far seems to have some value. The conception goes like this: Plato's view is that we all know everything already and only need loving midwives to discover it in ourselves. That seems a wonderfully useful way to look at seminar members. In our experimental seminars, people are repeatedly surprised by the quality of the ideas that they find in themselves. This midwife notion implies that everyone in a seminar is everyone else's teacher and also everyone else's student. It only requires staying sensitive to which seems the most useful role at any given moment.

In such a seminar, the participation of every member is important. In most groups, including in most seminars, conversation is dominated by a few assertive and verbal people and the only available points of view are theirs. The goal of the seminar is the maximization of resources and that means that the more widespread the participation is, the richer the educational experience. Each consciousness is unique and irreplaceable, and when some people get shut out, the loss is significant. And, although we have found endless problems trying to make room for the more shy and reticent members, it does seem that to the extent that the atmosphere is accepting, there are few silent members.

A further aspect of this conception is that a seminar is like a work of art and that the members of it are actually composing it as they discuss the book. That means it is of value to keep an eye on the relation of the parts of the discussion to each other. Thus in the last half of the discussion period, it is interesting and helpful to keep reviewing aspects of the first half to see if new relationships between disparate elements of the conversation can be discovered.

There are several reasons for this. The attempt to make connections between all elements of the seminar encourages the members to look at the material in different ways and this produces a good deal of learning. Further, attempting such connections make the discussion much easier to remember. That, in turn, makes it easier to relate the new books and subsequent seminars. When seminar discussions range widely, one often finishes the session feeling that a lot of exciting stuff happened, but not being able to recall any of it, since each new idea pushes out the old ones. An attempt to find a unifying scheme gives one a memory framework.

This has further implications too: The more disparate and heterogeneous the parts of a composition are, the richer that composition is, assuming of course that the elements are successfully integrated. So, the more points of view that are shared in a seminar, the richer the potential ultimate product. When the subject of conversation apparently changes, it may only represent a new far-out element to be eventually integrated into the composition.

And a final implication, to us the most important of them all: In doing this work we have come to see the world as composed of an endless collection of dilemmas. Each time a seminar develops a point of view about anything, it quickly becomes clear that tied closely to it is a point of view that seems hopelessly contradictory to the first. The classic dilemma was that of Odysseus who had to sail his ship between a devouring monster and a terrible whirlpool and who knew there simply wasn't room in the channel to stay out of reach of both. The first look at the starving baby problem in the Lao-tze discussion appears at first to be such a dilemma.

Now what we typically do in our culture (and most academic discussions are no exception) is deny the pain of the dilemma by assuming that one horn or the other must be wrong. We then set up an argument -- my horn against yours. The undesirable consequences of that are clear. First, it is very hard to think during combat; second, it makes winning much more important than consciousness expansion; and third, it forces us into a greatly over-simplified view of the issue when its complexity may be its greatest beauty. So, in our seminars, we learned to try to identify the dilemmas and reserve them rather than let them turn into debate.

But what do you do with them? It seemed to us that the thing to do was to try to convert them not to debate, but rather to be dialectic. Dilemma is two unreconcilable horns. Dialectic is two posed potential antagonists (thesis and antithesis) who come together, and out of that marriage give birth to the synthesis. A small example might be the synthesis produced by the meeting of Lao-tze's view and the starving baby problem -- the synthesis of seeing that the short-term horrors were perhaps inextricably linked to the avoidance of much great long-term horrors. Earlier I suggested that trying to relate disparate parts of the discussion to each other was a mind expander. It has seemed to us that working to integrate seemingly opposed points of view is even more expanding. And it has the extra advantage of putting us into a collaborative building relationship with our seminar mates instead of into a struggle with them.

Another issue raised by conceptualizing the seminar this way is: What is the primary emotional quality of such a situation? The psychoanalysts have suggested that there are two great preemptive models for all of life: loving and fighting. Those are seen as

representing the two major kinds of psychic energy available to people, and all of life is seen as using those energies in various combinations. At the deepest levels, people are seen as categorizing each new situation as primarily a love situation or primarily a fight situation. We tell ourselves in our upstairs rational mind that a college class or discussion with friends is neither a love situation nor a fight situation, but something altogether different; it's a growth situation or an achievement situation, or a learning situation. But from the deep centers (so the analysts suggest) we check it out to see if what we're really in here is a love situation or a fight. The present conception of the seminar recognizes that it is sure to have both kinds of energy in it, and suggests that, given our culture, it is unlikely that we will err on the side of too little fight. (Mere politeness of course by no means necessarily represents love, sometimes only thinly disguised fighting.) The changes are that we are apt to err on the side of too much fight, competition, and struggle. The sort of seminar we have been exploring is built closer to the lovemaking model. In a fight I want you to be hurt and I want all the pleasure for myself. In lovemaking I get a good deal of my pleasure from your pleasure, and I can forego a lot of my self-interested indulgence if I see a way of giving you pleasure, growth, and a chance to explore.

There are a couple of obvious philosophical underpinnings to this conception of a seminar. They are particularly worth noting because they underlie not only this seminar conception, but also much of humanistic psychology. One of these is the philosophy of science which calls itself Conventionalism and which holds that we must now regretfully admit that the laboratory never established the truth of a theory since proponent of an opposing theory can always develop data to support theirs. The Conventionalists go on to say that no idea is true or false in the old sense that it could be shown so in the laboratory. And so for the notion of true and false they have substituted two criteria for the adoption of a theory or an idea: 1) Is it technologically useful? Will its application cure pneumonia or make a railroad train run? And 2) Is it aesthetically pleasing? Does it turn you on? Is it a way you enjoy looking at the world? Does it make life more beautiful for you to see it this way? Since God is not likely to tell us what's true and what's false you might as well adopt points of view that please you. You can see the relationship of that philosophy to our conception of a seminar. It makes arguing less reasonable than exploring and building.

Another philosophical tenet involved here is that which holds that it is a drag to have people arm wrestling with you all the time. Argument, so this tenet goes, produces insight less often than it produces ulcers and each time we can design a part of our lives to replace argument with collaborative explorations, we increase learning and, if only a little bit, decrease life stress.

And a final philosophical foundation that, like the others, underlies much of the material of this course comes from the Orientalists, those who believe that since all we perceive or imagine we perceive is illusion, that there is no sense in contesting among shadows. One aspect of humanistic psychology, which picked this view up and developed it, was the psychedelic drug exploration. The psychologists who worked with these drugs developed a model that went something like this: Someone has taken LSD and is lying on his back watching the ceiling. He says to his companion (also high), "What a fantastic scene I'm watching," and describes it. Imagine his companion saying back, "Dummy, that's not what's going on on the

ceiling; here's what's really going on." Imagine trying to argue about what's going on on the blank white ceiling. And then compare that argument with the accepting of each other's visions and the relief of realizing that there need be no argument that both visions are happening on the ceiling.

The discovery that much of humanistic psychology picked up from those workers (and of course from the Orientalists) was that there was considerable interest in viewing the straight world that way too. If an action-decision must be made, the problem is different of course. If we're walking in the woods and your illusion is a harmless kitty coming toward us and mine is an angry wildcat, then I say we'll want to make a decision about whose illusion to base my actions on. But in any other situation, such as an idea-building group, when no action-decision is necessary, then, these workers suggest it is not very fruitful to share, explore, and develop each other's visions. And as always, the more different hers is from yours, the more you will learn and grow.

That, then, is a sketchy picture of the seminar conception we have been watching evolve as we worked on this problem. We also learn that most of us bring three major problems into a seminar with us and that these three problems made the achievement of this ideal difficult. The first is that we all seem conservative by nature and the acceptance of new ideas is very hard. For instance, when some of the seminar groups in this Psychology 3 course discover inadequacies in these conceptions and try to show me better ways of thinking about seminars, I am going to have a terrible time giving up my ideas and learning something new. I may manage, but it's going to feel like surgery.

The second problem is that we're trained to believe that every lonely little idea that enters our heads is so rare and so important to how the world sees us that we had better make damned sure we get full mileage out of it. Students who have to write nine term papers a year whether they feel like it or not, tend to hoard ideas like crazy and squeeze them for all they're worth, believing that they are going to need every one they can beg, borrow, or steal. I got all the way through graduate school on two ideas. If I had ever thought up a third one I would have held on to it and defended it for dear life. So a seminar conception which asks us to let our own ideas go if the conversation is going somewhere else or if the current need is to develop someone else's idea, is a tough conception to live up to. Hard as it is to believe, the hope is of course that once we can stop holding on to the few precious ideas, then we release our own creative flow, rather than deplete it.

The third problem is that it is very hard for us to acknowledge learning from each other. It is hard because somehow that makes us seem one-down and inferior. Some of you can probably still remember grade school and the frantic waving of hands when teacher asked a question. In that schoolroom we were being thoroughly taught that it was important to be the answer; the kid that didn't know found out from listening to a classmate give the answer, and was made to feel thick and slow. In a seminar there are few more exhilarating moments than one student (or teacher) saying to another, "That is fantastic. I never saw it that way before. Thank you for that." We have found that a few such experiences tend to dispel the notion that that acknowledgement puts you one-down. Nonetheless this problem is deeply ingrained in some of us and not easy to lose.

You have, perhaps, some idea of the goal now and some idea of the problems. Maybe it would help to list the things we have found to be of help to people interested in approaching that goal.

The first ones concern the reading. It is really important, of course, that the members of the seminar do the agreed upon reading and do it on time. The seminar depends on everybody having done the reading at the appropriate time and having done reasonably carefully. It is clearly impossible to develop this kind of seminar otherwise.

We found something that helped us read for the seminars, something that is probably helpful for all reading. We have discovered the excitement of reading with an eye kept open for what we came to call a cosmic question. We were kidding, of course, but then again we really weren't. The idea of the cosmic question is this: Suppose you knew that a very wise person would be at the seminar, someone who had lived long and thought deeply and who knew this book well. And suppose you were only allowed to ask this person a single question about the book. You should want it to evoke information that was very important to you, so you'd give it some thought. The ancient sea god, Proteus, would truthfully answer any question put to him (if you could hold him long enough) and so it behooved the hero to choose the question carefully. The reason your cosmic question ought to be a question is that it is assumed that your understanding of this book is not yet perfect and that you're not going to the seminar just to teach others but to learn yourself. And the whole process turns out for most people to be a helpful way to read. It focuses and organizes one's approach to the book to be continually asking yourself, "What here is most confusing or fascinating or important to my life? Where is the cosmic question for me in all this?" Then we found that a good way to start the seminar was by each member reading her or his question. The seminar might then pick one to begin the discussion. Even moderately careful readers of this paper will not be surprised to learn that we believe that at bottom, each cosmic question about a given book is closely related to all the others, and beginning by exploring one is apt to lead to all the others, particularly if seminar members keep an eye out for that possibility.

The rest of our suggestions concern the seminar itself.

1. We found that a very good beginning for a seminar (even before sharing the cosmic questions) is for everyone to go around and say how they're feeling right here and now. This gives people a chance to express the anxieties or tensions which otherwise might tend to constrict them considerably. It also gives a good sense of us all being here together and of being among friends. Finally it is a very good way to help those of us who are a bit shy or reticent to begin to speak. Once I have spoken at all in a group, it's easier to speak again. Sometimes my first speaking is very hard though and this ritual removes that block.
2. While we're on the subject of feelings: It turns out to be most helpful during the seminar to talk about one's feelings about the book or about something someone else said. We are often taught that seminars are for cool clear thought. That turns out to be a restriction. The most exciting seminars are those in which both thinking and feeling is freely blended. When we can reveal the emotions about

the ideas as well as the ideas about the ideas, we learn a great deal about the emotional underpinnings of our opinions and we make it much easier for our brothers and sisters to engage in exchange with us. Sometimes books frighten us or anger us or please us and those feelings enrich a seminar as well as freeing up the idea flow significantly. Sometimes interpersonal feelings are helpful, too, although the sharing of them is of course not the primary purpose. But when someone hurts my feelings it may be better to let them know what they have done so that these feelings will not act negatively for the remainder of the semester.

3. One helpful thing turned out to be the giving of considerable respect to everything that gets said. That means that nothing is thought to be trivial. If you took the trouble to say it, it deserves my attention and my attempt to build on it, explore it, and try to relate it to the rest of the content. That is not the usual way of discourse. We are apt to ignore a good deal of what gets said or argue with it or give it a very cursory response. Perhaps it only prompts me to tell a story about myself, a story that interests me just because it's about myself, not because it really grew out of what you said. So it's quite unusual to listen hard to what each person says and then stay with it. Sometimes that means trying to stay with a lot of things at once. It often can't be done, but sometimes it leads you to see the relationship between the apparently divergent elements, and that can be very exciting.
4. Everyone in a seminar is, as we have seen, everyone else's teacher and everyone else's student. Think a minute about being a teacher. You have years of experience with good and bad teachers. You can be either kind you want. What does a good teacher do when a student tries out a tentative, half-formed idea? Does he/she say, "That's nonsense; you obviously haven't read Fichte's criticism of Kant?" If he did that to you, you'd be a long time coming back to that teacher. But suppose she/he told you that it was interesting and set about helping you build it? Would that constitute good teaching for you? The bad teacher shows you how much he/she knows: the good one shows you how much you know. And how about being a student? Many teachers believe that all teachers are really made by their students, that a good student can make any teacher look good and feel her/his power. My young colleagues have taught me that being a "good student" has terrible connotations for young people. It conjures up getting good grades in junior high and flattering the teacher. It would be good for our seminars if we could break out of that and see the good student as the one who is energetically available to learn from his/her peers.
5. We have a suggested how'm-I-doing criterion for individual members of the seminar: It has helped us to ask ourselves, "Am I learning anything right now, or am I merely reporting what I learned somewhere previously?" If I'm not learning, discovering something right now, it's helpful to make sure that condition doesn't persist too long.
6. We have a few helpful hints for BARN-RAISING. When I'm exploring your idea I might look at three things:
 - a) Are there any important data not dealt with?
 - b) Are there logical flaws?

c) Are there any aspects that don't communicate well?

7. What about following apparent tangents? We've looked at this one before, and there's no easy answer. The ideal answer is that there are no tangents; there are only far-out elements to be integrated. Which means that the thing to do with a tangent is stay with it long enough to get it well developed and then set about relating it to the main thrust of the composition. That is very hard and is really quite advanced seminar-ing, but it serves as a guide.
8. What about the quiet person problem? Now there's a dilemma! On the one horn, many of us tend to be uneasy about inviting a person in for fear they will feel coerced. On the other horn, experience indicates that having room specifically made for them considerably helps many people who have been having trouble talking. We might convert this dilemma to dialectic and try a synthesis something like this: Since sharing my feelings is apt to reduce your experience of coercion, which might be one way to deal with the problem. The concerned person might share his/her feelings with the quiet person, e.g., "I'm worried that you haven't said anything. I'd really like to know what you've been thinking about if you feel like saying something." Or, "I've been missing your participation today. I don't want to put you on the spot and still I want you to know that I'm anxious to hear from you if you feel like talking." Or, even, "I'm aware of your silence and am a little scared that I did something Monday that's turned you off."
9. When a seminar isn't going well, what can one do? In this course where we're all aware that seminar development is one of the course goals, it seems easy enough to stop and talk about the process and enlist the help of your sisters and brothers in fixing it. But when you're out in the large world, we have found to our cost that discussing the form of the seminar, particularly complaining about it, is seen as sophisticated one-upping and is resented, unless it is done very carefully and gently. A better way has turned out to be modeling the kind of behavior you would like to see more of in the seminar, such as focused listening, idea building, and acknowledging what you're learning from your seminar mates.
10. We have found that the growth of a seminar group is aided if at the end of every session the members take the last ten minutes or so and review the process of the seminar and see how they did and what they would like to do differently next time. We strongly recommend this procedure to you. We think your seminar could be a good part of the course for you, maybe a very good part indeed. We think it will give you help with finding your personal relation to the course material; we think it will give you a valuable journey with six or seven of your peers, and we very much hope it will have some lasting value for you as readers and as learners.