

Students as Agents for Change in Learning and Teaching

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Case study 5 – History: Students’ Seminar Experiences

Introduction

Students undertaking undergraduate History programmes have relatively few contact hours. Alongside lectures, one of the most important forms of contact between students, and between students and academics, is the seminar. Indeed, in the final year of programmes, seminars are the main form of contact. Given the importance of seminars to learning and teaching, it was decided to investigate a number of aspects in order to understand better the conceptualisation and reality of seminars, and thereby suggest recommendations for improving practice. Key areas of research included the identification of:

- What history students require from their seminars
- The role and importance of seminars from the perspective of history teaching staff
- Good seminar teaching practice

Methods of data collection and the sample

A paper-based questionnaire survey was designed by members of the Staff-Student Liaison Committee (SSLC). During lecture sessions, it was distributed by this group to all History students on the Exeter campus and to first year students on the Cornwall campus. It was completed by 32 Cornwall students, 104 Year 1, 31 Year 2 and 47 Year 3 Exeter students, to give a total of 214 responses. In order to gain more detailed views, the student Chair of the SSLC ran a focus group with eight students (one first year, three second and three third years). Interviews were also conducted with three purposely-selected members of staff: a female professor and Head of History; a second, male professor; and a newer, young female lecturer. They were selected for being well thought of by students and for being different in gender, role and length of teaching experience. All had been mentioned for their good practice within feedback from the questionnaire survey. Questions were loosely structured, giving the opportunity to follow interests in slightly different ways.

Analysis of data

Staff views on the role and teaching of seminars

The responses of the three academics interviewed by students on their views of the purpose and organisation of seminars are summarised in Table 1 below. They give different perspectives on the ways in which each of them conceives seminar provision: the purpose, content, role of the student, anticipated impact of the seminar and examples of what has worked well, and their preferences for teaching style,

1. The Head of History has been at Exeter since 1996. This year she has been teaching second and third year and Masters students, but has taught first year students in the past.
2. The male professor has worked at the University for twenty-two years and was the Head of History for three of these. He is currently the Deputy Head of History and Director of Research of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. He explains that his first seminar teaching was when he was finishing his PhD in Sheffield in '86/'87. Andrew taught a third year special subject module this year and an MA module, but has taught all years in the past.
3. The lecturer has been at Exeter for 2 years, previously teaching at Oxford and Cambridge. She currently teaches second and third year students.

	Head of History	Professor	Young lecturer
<i>Purpose of the seminar</i>	Seminars build on lectures. Lectures make up the 'spine of knowledge' and seminars are an opportunity for students to be challenged. She believes that seminars are about 'making people think' and this may mean looking at how concepts have changed, and setting aside assumptions that people have previously made.	The seminar is part of the wider module, it develop students' skills and allow them to progress. In the case of lecture plus seminar: lectures form the spine of the module and give students the baseline of knowledge needed, and seminars develop this further. Some seminars are not complemented by lectures and therefore need to stand alone: it is even more important that students get the most out of this experience since it is a 'meeting of minds' rather than the lecturer dictating. Seminars should be a positive experience and hopefully students will come away feeling they want to find out more.	The purpose of a seminar is to encourage discussion with and between students about material they have read and engaged with. It's not about the lecturer sitting there and saying, this is what you need to know, it's about them actually doing the work themselves. Students should, and will, challenge the tutor and should feel free to speak out.
<i>Content and how it is taught</i>	Lectures are used to give a broad overview of the module content; in the seminars, closely linked to the lectures, students work on documents that they read in advance with at least one item of the secondary reading. There is an important and strong sense of structure and students should know how they are going to move through in advance. They are provided with a single sheet with a series of questions that form the structure of the seminar series. They then, for example, speak about the paper, and do group work with focused questions. She tries not to become too directive. She will often 'gloss' what students have said by asking another question, or ask a student to extend what they have said, to clarify. The challenge is to help students to contribute without putting them on the spot. She uses group work with varying group sizes and may ask just one person to report back. She tries to draw as many people into the discussions as possible and hopes all students feel they can contribute.	Teaching is very much led by the research he does and his own research interests. He then looks at modes of assessment, contact hours and credit bearing of the module and this influences how he teaches. He prefers open discussions with students. He makes sure that they have done the reading ahead of time and they come to class prepared to engage. It helps if students have an idea of the types of questions they would like to ask in the seminar, though this could be quite risky (but he quite likes this). He tries to be tolerant and fair but also intellectually challenging, to create security but not to allow students to become complacent or not get involved - it is about getting a balance.	She tends to use the seminars to look at thematic or theoretical perspectives in the material being taught. For example, when teaching conflicts in Africa, the lectures are used to outline the facts and the seminars will look at the material more comparatively. Questions such as why do they fight, why do children get pulled in, what are the theories of conflict are used. It's about striking a balance between fact- based material and analysis, with the seminar actually focussing on the analysis and theoretical perspectives. She also wants students to feel that they can engage with the lecturer without any problem.
<i>Experiences that have influenced the teaching approach</i>	Her own learning experiences influence how she teaches. During her undergraduate degree she was confronted with documents and this experience has meant that she now teaches using lots of documents. When she was a student she got the most out of seminars where she contributed and this is what she tries to achieve with students in her	When he was studying, students gave presentations and others simply listened. There was not enough interaction between students, and between students and the lecturer - which is one of the reasons he prefers the open style seminar. In the past he had much smaller class sizes and it was often difficult to achieve the	Previous experiences of seminars as a student herself have led her to be conscious of trying to keep things very relaxed and make sure that everyone feels that they can say something. There shouldn't be any sense of hierarchy. Peer reviews with other staff and previous teaching experience can be a good learning tool

	seminars now. The departmental peer review helps her to look at her own teaching as well as learn from others.	dynamic he wanted. He thinks it interesting to see his colleagues teach; staff development days are very worthwhile and are a chance for new colleagues to share their ideas.	to experience other methods of teaching. She believes that it doesn't matter what you are teaching, it's about having a personality and encouraging participation.
<i>Role of the student within the seminar</i>	Students take the leading role in seminars and her role is mainly to facilitate. She tries to get her students talking to each other. She considers it very important for students to know what her expectations are. She makes it clear from the start that she expects students to do the preparatory reading. She tries to ensure that all students contribute equally and that there is an atmosphere in her seminar that allows for this, without putting people in awkward positions.	It is the students' role to prepare well and to participate in the seminar. He makes a point of explaining to students that they will get out of the module what they put into it. Getting students to participate is quite a challenge and one of the most difficult things to get right. He tries to explain to students that it is ok to make mistakes and ensures that students feel safe and secure. He hopes students will trust him and not be afraid to get involved. He thinks that the students have to trust him and believes, as essential to good teaching, that you should pay people respect and treat people how you expect to be treated.	Students should lead the seminar as far as possible. A tutor can give the introductory context and purpose, but apart from that they are only there to move discussion on. Students get out what they put in. She explains to students that she will facilitate the discussion and give out the materials, but after that it's up to them. It's a fine line between encouraging participation and students feeling you are asking for something from them when they are not ready. For the first weeks the more forward personalities come through, but when she starts to get a feel for the others, she can push them slightly. It is just people managing.
<i>Impact and class achievement by the end of the seminar</i>	It is important for students to have reached some conclusions by the end of a seminar. Five minutes are always left at the end to discuss the three main themes or conclusions. This might be achieved through a whole class discussion or pairs. She is definitely seeking not just to help them to learn facts but to develop their analytical skills so they get to the point where <i>they</i> can ask the questions. She aims to make students think outside the parameters they had previously, and that they achieve what she describes as a 'light bulb moment' where they begin to understand how people might have thought in the past. She hopes she inspires enthusiasm and that students want to go away and learn more.	He wants students to come away with a sense of the subject matter, not just with a generic skills set, and feeling they want to learn more, with an intellectual curiosity. He believes it is about exciting people and ensuring that students can hold their own in discussion. He thinks this is a life skill and that students will be confronted with situations in their working lives where they will have to be able to do this.	The idea is to get students thinking critically about major issues, such as gender and sexuality, conflict, development studies.
<i>Adaptation of seminar teaching to suit different years or group dynamics</i>	In their first introductory seminars, she does not necessarily expect students to have done the reading, and she specifically works with them on maps and documents and looks up definitions with them, so they understand more about the ways of working. She often focuses on prior assumptions they might have brought to their studies. Group sizes tend to be different for different years and this can effect how she teaches. Smaller groups for first	Modules are structured differently in each year as a way of supporting students' progression. In the first year it needs to be more didactic and to gradually move away from this format and from making allowances for them. Level 3 modules are more difficult in terms of content and expectations to ensure that students progress, but there is always a need to note the differing abilities of students. Sometimes in groups,	Second year students seem to take more from the lectures, whereas third year students are much more drilled into how to actually get the best out of the seminar; that does seem to be easier to pick up as you go through. Seminars should be based on the students, how they perceive seminars and their role. Her teaching style is adapted to different group dynamics. 10-15 minute presentations by a pair are often

	<p>year students are helpful because they feel less inhibited in that situation. In all classes there are students who are able to contribute well and student who find this more difficult.. She has had groups where she has had quite dominant students and ensuring all students have enough space to make contributions can be difficult.</p>	<p>some speakers talk a lot more than others. Quiet groups are easier to deal with than groups where there is a disparity in contributions made. He sometimes splits the group into smaller groups, sets different types of work or moves to a discussion and presentation format.</p>	<p>used to lead on to a group discussion. This works with some groups but others do not put in any effort. In this case, the seminar becomes more structured, still starting with a presentation but it is made clear that there must be discussion and everyone else has to come along with questions. With third years she is as relaxed as possible to generate good group dynamics and let it flow from there. So as the term goes on, she has to say less and less.</p>
<i>Resources</i>	<p>Students are sometimes asked to bring in visual sources. She uses her own resources including audio as she feels that it can help to listen while reading text from the relevant periods. In future she definitely expects to make more use of electronic and digital resources including websites. She also uses the Special Collections at the University and brings her students to the library to see these.</p>	<p>He uses source materials that he expects students to read ahead of time.</p>	<p>WebCT is used quite a lot. She does a lot of actual source work, copies of individual records. For example, if the seminar is looking at criminal cases, a wide variety of sources, such as reports, photographs, videos and audio, are used. She sometimes uses music to produce an atmosphere relevant to the topic.</p>
<i>Feedback on teaching</i>	<p>Students are able to offer feedback at the end of the year. She often knows instinctively what has worked and what hasn't and will adapt to make things better.</p>	<p>Module and course Evaluations (MACE) are routinely used to gather feedback formally and he speaks to students informally, though he does not want to intimidate them. He also feels that he often simply trusts his own judgement.</p>	<p>The students usually will come up afterwards and say thanks, that was very useful. She tries to make the effort to speak to students on an individual basis, usually during essay feedback time just to make sure that they are coming along and that they are happy to discuss issues.</p>
<i>What worked really well</i>	<p>She has split her seminar group up into 3 groups, two of which debate two sides of a historiographical question and the third of which took notes. She found this was a very good way to bring together the knowledge from that section of the module. She has also given them a series of questions and asked them to construct responses on mental reservation or equivocation so that they can really understand what it means. Another technique she often uses is asking students to think about a modern parallel for the situation that they are discussing and this makes students understand both the similarities and differences between the 16th century and the 20th and 21st century.</p>	<p>The best seminars are when you get a group that works well - when he is able to empower students. He had a very good group once and the seminar was not working well, so he left the room and gave them twenty minutes to come up with something. When he came back they had done some great work. When he runs student presentations and is simply part of the group, and the students are asking the questions, this works well too. His view is that students are like academics who have not read as many books and he believes they are all capable of developing over time. Seeing students develop is one of the best aspects of his job.</p>	<p>Role play sessions, such as re-enacting a murder trial worked really well. It involved going through the case and picking out important parts with various peoples testimonies, finding key points and understanding how the legal side works. It worked really well.</p>

Table 1: Content of three staff interviews

Student views on seminar teaching: focus group responses

The focus group raised some important issues, in particular in relation to student engagement and the role of both academics and students in effective seminars.

Purpose of a seminar Students consider that a lecture introduces the topic and covers the main narrative and ideas and the seminar gives them the opportunity to go into more in depth. A first year student felt that seminars were also an opportunity to discuss anything that she had not understood from the lecture. They thought that having good structure to the seminar is beneficial and that it is helpful to have clear aims and objectives for any specific session.

The student's role in the seminar Those students in the focus group expected to participate actively in the seminar in order to enrich the experience. However other students were reported as not always participating and this meant there were sometimes awkward silences. They agreed that when the group had not prepared well enough it meant that the lecturer sometimes ended up taking over. They thought that a conversation with the lecturer about their role, the students' role and their expectations of students would be extremely helpful, and as useful for lecturers as for students. Students had experienced seminars where it seemed that the lecturer had not thought about how they were going to get the discussion started and this could be inhibitive. They thought that confident lecturers were better able to let the seminar run without taking over.

Student preparation The students stated that their interest in the subject has an impact on how well they prepare, or whether they thought they would be caught out if they had not prepared. Students suggested that guidance on preparation varied; some lecturers gave out a reading pack, for example, whereas others gave less support. They thought that the hours of work that were stated on their module descriptors were not helpful and did not give them a realistic idea of how much preparation they needed to do. There was more pressure to do the preparation in their second and third years because the work became more difficult and there were higher expectations of them. They also thought that focused, structured reading was better than being set too much reading. Some students said that if they are given a lot to cover it was much easier to get away with it because they did not feel accountable and could go to the seminar hoping that someone else had done the work.

Resources They outlined how some lecturers made very good use of the VLE, including uploading extracts from books and audio files, whereas others preferred to give students paper copies of handouts. They did find the VLE useful, but thought as long as the resources were made available they did not mind in what format. Having to make their own paper copies was considered unfair and they would prefer for the resources to be put online in this case. All core texts should be made available, if not online then through Ready Text. One student would have liked all content to be put on the VLE, but thought that some lecturers believed this would discourage students from attending lectures. The group were not convinced that this would be the case if, for example, lecture PowerPoints were put online. Some students had also had experience of video-recorded lectures and audio files being put online and all thought that these would be useful to their learning.

Student participation and engagement The focus group students agreed that the lecturer/student relationship is important. They want to feel comfortable in the seminar, but also believe that lecturers need to challenge them. They suggested that their confidence varied from seminar to seminar and that some lecturers were better than others at making students feel at ease. When lecturers were more relaxed, this made for a better atmosphere. If students engaged well in the seminar, it made it more interesting and motivated all of them to become involved. Student-led presentations were seen as a way of encouraging participation and making the seminar more student-led. They can be used to great effect and enable them to feel that what they say is worthwhile. When students were not participating well in the seminar, more structured formats could be useful including group work and leading questions. The lecturer's ability to ask the right questions and to help students to develop their ideas is important. They considered this was very much about the seminar leader being able to teach. They appreciated group work, such as answering questions in small groups and reporting back to the class, or developing essay plans as revision tools. Those who had experienced role play thought that as long as it remained academic and did not become a drama lesson it could be useful, especially to develop empathy. One of the group suggested that informal seminars at the start of the year where they go to a café with their lecturer would help build a personal relationship, help students to get to know each other and the lecturer, and to break the ice. Visiting experts can also be useful and could help to see how a historian works. However, they found the trip to the Cathedral with the whole year of little benefit because there were so many of them.

Seminar formats These students outlined several formats for seminars they had experienced, some of which seemed to be more effective than others.

- Students addressed a specific essay question and this meant that the seminar was more focused.
- Splitting the reading across the group and then mixing these students up in the seminar to explain what they had learnt was reported as one good way to encourage preparation and participation.
- Students were asked to do the reading and then send the lecturer three questions they would like to have answered. Although this meant students did the reading, not all of the questions were answered and the seminar did not flow well because the questions did not follow on from one another.
- A balance between student presentations and structured, directed questions facilitated by the lecturer was useful, but some lecturers begun by asking direct questions and then were too quick to jump in when students did not respond immediately

Ethos The students stated that trust and mutual respect in a seminar is very important and a feeling that their views will not be ridiculed. On the other hand students did not want to be patronised, or praised undeservedly.

Overall, the first year student had enjoyed the year, but she had felt that sometimes it was only by the last seminar of a module that she began to get a grip on the subject matter. A second year student felt she had become more confident, and that this was connected to giving presentations. A third year student felt he had really begun to understand what it meant to be an historian and found the special subjects very rewarding. Another expressed continued surprise at the differences in enthusiasm of some students and also the differences in lecturers' abilities to teach. She thought that students were less easy to change but that the department should work with lecturers to improve teaching.

Student views on seminar teaching: questionnaire data

Nearly all students indicated that, on the whole, their experience of seminars was positive (88%). Third year students were most positive (98%), followed by second years (90%) and first years (85%). Three quarters of students thought they had taken part in useful activities in their seminars and four in five *always* try to attend the seminar.

Seminar 1

Students stated that they were given adequate information with regards to preparation required for the seminar (88%) and adequate advice on how to prepare (91%). Third year students were most confident that they knew how to prepare (99%) and first year students the least, with 14% being unsure about preparation. Most students thought they were given adequate notice regarding preparation (80%). Students thought that preparation was a key part of their learning (73%).

About half of all students enjoy preparing for their selected seminar, but over a quarter of first year students indicated that they did not enjoy preparing for seminars. Nearly all third year students (93%) agreed that the preparation they did for the seminar related to the content of the seminar, but first and second year students were less clear (65% and 77%). Most third year students did not consider they could contribute effectively if they had not prepared (87%); this was somewhat lower for first and second years (69% and 71%).

Table I shows that most students thought they needed to prepare between 1-2 or 2-3 hours, but few did as much preparation as they thought they should.

Hours	0	0-1	1-2	2-3	3-4	4+
Hours required	1	10	31	28	14	17
Hours undertaken	1	19	38	24	10	8

Table 1: Number of hours students think they are required to prepare and the number that they actually prepare

Paper resources are handed out in most seminars and the majority of seminars also have electronic sources accessible online. Most students prefer paper resources. However, only a quarter of students in their first and second years agree that there are adequate copies of resources available in the library, though two thirds of third year students are happy with provision. Under half of students indicated that most resources they need are available through Ready Text.

Three quarters of students thought learning outcomes were made clear in the seminar and stated that having clear learning goals helps their learning. Over three quarters of students indicated that the lecturer brings the seminar together to conclude and many students find this helpful (88%). Most students are confident about

speaking in the seminar. Three quarters of students thought that the quality of their preparation impacted on how well they could engage in the seminar, and this was higher for third year students (96%). A third of students thought that their peers' lack of participation in the seminar impeded their learning. In general, seminars were most valued by third year students: a quarter of first year students thought that if they prepared well, then attending the seminar did not enhance their learning any further, a fifth of second year students indicated this but only a tenth of third year students agreed.

Students indicated that their best seminars were well structured; three quarters thought that the module coordinator's enthusiasm encouraged participation and most students found the coordinator easy to get on with and approachable. Nearly all second and third years (91%) thought the best seminars were beneficial to their learning; this was lower for first year students (66%). Over half of seminars were led by both staff and students, which usually meant a combination of activities run by the coordinator, and student presentations. Two in five first year students indicated that their seminars were coordinator-led. This decreased in the second year (29%) and again in the third year (21%).

Examples of useful seminar activities

In the questionnaire, students were given the opportunity to give an example of an activity that they found enjoyable or useful in their history seminars. These are listed below, in seven categories: format and structure, presentations, discussion and debate, group-work, role-play, sources and resources, and lecturer enthusiasm and ethos.

Format/structure

- *'I find the structure of the Spanish Civil War seminars encourage all members of the group to participate and learn'.*
- *'The best seminars by far - source analysis, group presentations and discussions'.*
- *'Balance between being student-led and teacher-led is good'.*
- *'Clear expectations of what to do pre-seminar. Seminar structured with a group presentation followed by group discussion - I found this cohesive to my learning and came away at the end of the hour feeling that I had learned a great deal'.*
- *'I have found all seminars useful to reinforce my learning - that is not possible in lectures alone'.*
- *'Making me consider issues from other points of view'.*
- *'I find the 500 word reports required each week extremely helpful practice in terms of concise sources analysis, and essay writing skills on a stylistic and presentation front'.*
- *'The seminars were group led, with input from the tutor, they were on the topic we had written an essay about and it cemented the learning and opened up differing opinions and ways to look at things'.*
- *'The chance to quiz a lecturer on their beliefs on a specific subject area covered in that seminar'.*

Although students were asked about 'good' seminars, there was one negative comment about the format of a seminar that illustrates a specific kind of expectation from a student.

- *'Euro-centricity- really interesting topic but not a useful seminar as it didn't relate to the essay questions or exam titles'.*

Presentations

- *'I presented on an article, along with several others, and a lively debate was allowed to develop for the rest of the seminar'.*
- *'Group presentations help me to learn and understand a topic'.*
- *'Presentations by peers to encourage debate as well as summarise the reading that had to be done. This helps to consolidate what had to be read as preparation and makes me feel more confident to participate in discussions'.*
- *'Presentation - gave a breakdown of the subject and can be used as a revision tool'.*
- *'An exercise where we were required to compile a case for and against a particular government policy decision'.*
- *'I enjoy that we are shown presentations and then get to ask questions once they have finished, as I feel this helps me engage with the topic'.*
- *'Group presentations to coincide with essays are useful'.*

Discussion/debate

- *'The discussions in one seminar are always well focussed and interesting, encouraging interest and participation. There is generally a lot of well-informed discussion, offering critical debate on sources and others' work'.*
- *'General discussion in the seminars is well structured and engaged with. Federalist vs. Republican style debate - very engaging, required everyone to participate'.*
- *'I find general discussion between students to be most beneficial and when the lecturer facilitates this, the seminar runs well as it allows students to form their own views to some extent'.*
- *'Lecturer gave an introduction to court case and then we were able to discuss ideas in small groups with help of questions. Reporting back meant ideas were consolidated and learning enhanced'.*
- *'I enjoy the group discussion in Foundation seminar as a variety of opinions are often offered - resulting in enhanced learning'.*
- *'The History Foundation seminar is very engaging; a good atmosphere for learning and discussion has helped develop any arguments, and my ability to speak in class'.*
- *'The lecturer made a debate splitting the class into the two topics. This meant one had to engage in more than a question and answer session as it becomes more personal'.*
- *'Well organised - presentations and then class discussion led to some interesting new ideas'.*

Again there was just one negative comment:

- *'I tend to prefer large-scale discussion rather than smaller group activities or presentations. I find presentations etc. can be quite boring and don't always add a lot to my learning'.*

Groupwork

- *'My Persecution and Toleration module seminars, I found extremely beneficial. Each week we were given a number of sources to read and some background reading. These generally formed the basis of the initial group discussion. Each week 2 or 3 individuals would present class papers on a specific subject relating to the themes of the seminar. I found these classes related very well to the theme discussed in the lecturers and have prepared me well for the exams'.*
- *'Skills seminars are well led – the lecturer's knowledge of the subject and encouragement of group work makes discussion flow well'.*
- *'Being put into smaller groups within the seminar group means that people are more confident speaking on the topic. Compared to seminars where the whole group debates for the whole hour, this way seems to work much better. The second half of the seminar the different groups debate together so we hear everyone's views anyway'.*
- *'We were put in groups and had to read a primary source. Then we took down ideas on a whiteboard and discussed each other's views'.*

Role Play

- *'We did a role-play of a colonial courtroom. I thought this was useful as it got everyone involved and made seminars more enjoyable'.*
- *'Role-play used to recreate African court cases allowing members of the group to assume parts of the case taught me a lot more than a traditional lecture'.*
- *'The seminars for the Viking Perspective module were very interactive with role-play and moving discussions. I have found these seminars to be most enjoyable, relevant and engaging'.*
- *'In a Vikings seminar we acted out a mock trial with roles being picked out of a hat, cases being argued in front of a jury, and a verdict decided by a judge'.*

Sources/ resources

- *'Slides of various patients etc. - individual discussion of each photograph - Disease and Civilisation'.*
- *'I particularly enjoyed the seminars where the lecturer set clear reading and always discussed it. He then broadened it. Most of the seminar class participated'.*
- *'...the way the lecturer focuses on the sources and question is helpful'.*
- *'Having key sources and documentation in a bound booklet'.*

Lecturer enthusiasm and ethos

- *'Enthusiasm encourages high level of participation by all members of the group and makes it a good seminar'.*
- *'I enjoy seminars as the group is small and we are all able to get on well and having a laugh makes it much more fun to learn and an effective learning environment'.*
- *'A high level of knowledge – the lecturer is always knowledgeable and encouraging'.*

- *'Seminars are positive in the way the lecturer is always very complementary about what you have to say'.*
- *'Lecturer's outgoing nature is also helpful'.*
- *'I enjoy these seminars and always find my module coordinator and peers enthusiastic and eager to debate the question at hand. This enhances my critical thinking'.*
- *'Certain lecturers tend to encourage a very high standard of student presentation and participation'.*
- *'I find my World seminars particularly enjoyable especially the seminar regarding the history of organised crime. This was largely due to the enthusiasm of both the lecturer and the class'.*
- *'I enjoyed the final Foundation seminar of the first term regarding Palaeography, it was lively, engaging and I took away a great deal of information presented to me'.*
- *'Great debate on the concepts of Imperial rule, nationhood and hegemony. The class was switched on and the lecturer listened and directed the course of discussion with great skill and enthusiasm'.*

Summary of Findings

Overall, there is evidence that students enjoy seminars – or at least the seminars that they rate favourably - and that this enjoyment, as well as understanding of the purpose of seminars, increases as students progress through the three years. There is considerable agreement between the student responses from the questionnaire, the student focus group and the staff interviewed as to what constitutes a good seminar in the context of learning history. The kinds of engagement sought by the three academics interviewed, as well as by other staff, is appreciated by those students involved in this study: that is, they enjoy discussion and debate and learning about different viewpoints, they appreciate being able to learn from each other in group-work (so long as this is well handled) and from peer presentations and role-play. They value the structure of seminars, and the enthusiasm of their teachers. In general, they appreciate the requirement to actively and responsibly engage with the resources, with the lecturer running the seminar, and with their peers.

Recommendations/Solutions

Much of the above information has also been prepared in the format of a booklet that can be circulated to all history staff, and potentially to other staff across the School of Humanities and Social Sciences or beyond. It would also be useful for first year history students, at least, to give them a better picture of what they should expect of seminars and how they might engage with them. It is therefore recommended that plans for circulation are drawn up and implemented, and that School funding should be allocated for this purpose. In the longer term, it would be worth evaluating whether a booklet such as the one produced is either helpful or of interest to students and staff, and whether it can have any impact on improving practice in seminars.

It is also recommended that the booklet should be circulated to a number of staff in Education Enhancement and possibly used in the training of graduate teaching assistants and new staff who run seminars with students.

*Study undertaken with Penny Roberts
Subject Chair, History
July 2009*