

## Defining Features: Graduate Seminar Course

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### Key Features

Modeled after courses in German universities, the seminar has remained largely unchanged over the last century. In the graduate seminar, students are often expected to produce publishable research as overseen by a leading professor as well as write and present critiques of related research often curated by the leading professor.

### Key Design Considerations

The purpose of a graduate seminar course is to immerse students in the discipline and provide opportunities to think critically about it. In addition, they learn about various research methods that are commonly employed in their field. To this end, attention to readings\* and how they are related to the discipline and interrelate to others is an important design feature. Other questions to explore when designing a seminar course may be:

- What are the various disciplinary issues associated with the seminar topic?
- Do the issues suggest a framework for studying the topic?
- Which issues are appropriate for investigation by the students I will have?
- How will I provide the background and context for students to understand the issues?
- How can I present the readings\* in such a way that students will think critically about the topic?
- What classroom activities can I use to stimulate critical thinking?
- What are the basic research tools in the discipline that students need to know?
- What classroom exercises can I use to help students learn about (or use) these tools?
- From my own experience, what insights about research can I contribute to the class? (Neal, 1996)

Answering questions such as these will provide a strong foundation on which a graduate seminar can be constructed.

### Contextual Variations

According to Steen, Bader and Kubrin (1999) models of delivery are typically determined by how the content is presented. Four variations are identified and defined below (Steen, Bader and Kubrin, 1999).

Lecture – All course material falls to the professor to disseminate and there is very little if any student-student or student-teacher interaction. Given the purpose of the graduate seminar is to provide opportunities for students to immerse themselves in the topic, this is not the most often adopted format.

Professor Lead Discussion – This format is the most typical structure. While a large portion of material still falls to the professor, teacher-student interaction is an important part of the model. However, thought must be given to ensuring that questions are not too broad nor too specific as to stifle discussion.

Student Lead Discussion – This format is also fairly common and provides students experience in leading discussion. However, it is often the case that students are not as familiar with the content and do not have the ability to make the same kinds of connections or create the same kinds of frameworks that the professor would. If students are leading discussion, the professor is often still active as a guide to structuring the discussion.

Read and Present – During a read and present class, the students are provided with a weekly reading list and are asked to present thoughts and reactions. This places the professor in a more passive role. Taking into consideration the equitable amount of time each student is allotted to present would be important to ensure continued engagement.

Seminar courses can also be taught at the undergraduate level. At an undergraduate level “seminar” can mean a course with different speakers at each class, or to mean a small, discussion-based course. In this type of seminar, students critically discuss readings\* curated by the instructor. Discussion in this more intimate setting allows students to disagree and support assertions with factual information derived from the readings\*.

\*including but not limited to texts, articles, lectures etc.

## **Selected Resources**

Neal, E. Leading the seminar: Graduate and undergraduate, *Essays on Teaching Excellence, Toward the Best in the Academy*, Volume 8, Number 1, 1996-97

Steen, S., Bader, C., Kubrin, C., Rethinking the graduate seminar. *Teaching Sociology*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Apr., 1999), pp. 167-173

Seminar. (n.d.). Retrieved October 23, 2019, from <https://teachingcommons.stanford.edu/gallery/seminar>.