

Exporting the German Seminar: A Polemic

My postgraduate research interests emerged from my studies at the University of Trier during my year abroad as an undergraduate linguist. More specifically, they were first formed through my participation in master's-level seminars termed *Hauptseminare* and *Oberseminare*. But I chose not to pursue my postgraduate career in Germany. After Finals the following academic year, I began a graduate programme in German at the University of California, Berkeley, which – as is typical for US higher-level degrees – is underpinned in significant part by seminars. I then returned to Europe to complete a MSt. at Oxford, an institution that increasingly favours the seminar as a mode of its master's-level teaching.

My academic trajectory thus mirrors the historical development of the modern university seminar, from its conception in eighteenth-century Germany to its export to the US and, from there, across to the UK. In the next twenty minutes or so, I'll combine historical research, brief reading of educational literature and personal experience in order to advance a polemic about the historical and ideal form of postgraduate seminars. I'll primarily compare Germany and the US, but my argument is nevertheless relevant to today's debate here in the UK. For in my view, recent governmental pressures and cuts concerning undergraduate education, and the institutional structural changes that will likely result, risk weakening the pedagogical staple of most master's courses: the seminar.

According to a seminal 1989 article by William Clark in the journal *History of Science*, the modern research institute as a physical space, and more specifically for the purposes of my present talk, the seminar as an institutionalized teaching practice, had its beginnings in the *seminaria philologica* of Germany in the long eighteenth century, roughly starting with the seminar for classical philology in Göttingen in 1737 and widely established by the 1830s. The seminar was an invention of the bureaucratic state, though it was indebted to four institutions of the Early Modern period, namely: the *cathedra*, the *collegium*, the seminary and the private society. This modern re-working of tradition served to produce, in Clark's terms, 'normalized, yet individualized academic personalities'. The seminar as a physical institution offered financial support for many students; and as a style of teaching, a seminar leader increasingly determined the topic of students' study – thereby institutionalizing his own academic interests – but acted, in theory at least, towards the students only as an intellectual guide.

Since I'm a literature student, I'd like to reiterate this point by reference to an episode in the novel *Der grüne Heinrich*, or 'Green Henry' by the Swiss-German author Gottfried Keller. He writes in the 1850s of a young poor philosopher who had participated in a seminar for the education of primary school teachers. Yet the seminar leader apparently took to any student in the class who applied effort, and encouraged him to develop his independent thought. As a result, any student who was taught in this seminar and who could think for himself, or who at least had the ambition to do so, quickly forgot plans to enter the primary school teaching profession. Thus the seminar failed in its direct objective, writes Keller, but succeeded, as seminars allegedly generally did, in enabling intellectual agency, even in those without wealth.

An important part of the seminar from its conception, and an increasingly central part of the seminar as it took hold as teaching practice, was an oral disputation that would be turned into written work after debate in the classroom. An 1819 statute of the Bonn classical philology seminar, for example, requires that every seminarian present his own paper every eighth week, so that at least one paper was given weekly. The seminar leader would then critique it, and there would also be a student respondent who would argue with the claims advanced in the work. Indeed, over time it became a requirement of the doctoral dissertation that the candidate *first* held a disputation on the topic. This component of the presentation will become central to my polemic today about the postgraduate seminar.

The seminar has become the founding structure for US graduate programmes, and it was originally imported from Germany. US postgraduate seminars follow a similar format to present-day German master's seminars, inasmuch as there is generally a collection of set readings, the requirement of student presentations, and the task of writing a term paper at the end. But US seminars are far smaller, and have on the whole remained far more effective, than their German counterparts. In Germany, seminar sizes range on average from around 25 students to 60; during my year in Germany, I participated in a seminar of 90 students and that was not unusual for a mainstream humanities subject (German literature). This crass difference in seminar size is due to the fact that most students in Germany continue to the master's level. Although a system of bachelor and two-year master's degrees has been introduced for some years now, some students still continue on the traditional degree courses of *Magister* and *Diplom*, which can only be completed at the equivalent of our master's degrees. Because of this previous, master's-only system, there is the widespread perception in Germany that the

master's is the desirable qualification for those graduate careers which in the UK require a bachelor. In the US, by contrast, university seminar-based graduate programmes are small and selective, because there is not such demand for them; the MA is often the initial stage of the PhD and not a course in its own right; and many universities fully fund the few graduates they accept.

This difference in size between the US and Germany has led to a significant difference in one particular seminar practice; and it is a difference that has become institutionalized in Germany. Most, if not all seminar series now permit or require – if only out of necessity due to excessive numbers of seminar participants – group presentations instead of individual ones. This form of collective work is called the *Gruppenreferat*. It is so well-established that it is introduced to foreign, especially US language learners under explanations of the German university system in the latest German language textbooks, such as in the second edition of *Vorsprung*, for example, a popular course book used in most American German departments. Moreover, a 2011 introduction to German teaching and learning theory for higher education by Victor Tiberius similarly lists the *Gruppenreferat* as a well-worn and appropriate teaching method employed in the contemporary seminar in Germany. I've never experienced such a concept as this at postgraduate level at the US – and that's surely a good thing.

What's wrong with group work, one might object. And indeed, the *Gruppenreferat* is often couched in positive terms: the ability to work in a team is a life skill, and one that employers value; it helps one make contact to one's peers and might lead to informal learning networks, revision parties, etc. But the *Gruppenreferat* runs counter to the historical ideals and purpose of the seminar that I outlined at the beginning of my paper; and it runs counter to the ideals and purpose we should uphold for the seminar today. The task of the *Gruppenreferat* is for the students to collectively engage with a topic and present it their knowledge to their peers; in reality, the demand is for intellectual consent. This goal of the *Gruppenreferat* is phrased most explicitly in a 2008 German student survival guide to giving seminar presentations, written by Tim-Christian Bartsch and Berndt Rex. They stress that the *Gruppenreferat* should be one harmonious presentation to which multiple students contribute. The authors offer four steps to success, but despite their emphasis on student research, they at no point advise questioning of the material – unless the student is questioning whether he or she has understood it correctly – and there is only one conceivable instance of an argumentative struggle. This is the possible scenario in which more than one student might want to

present a specific part of the material to the seminar. How should one preempt such a diplomatically fragile situation? Here Bartsch and Berndt suggest that each student should take the initiative and be the first to make the request about what he or she wants to do: the student who dares, they write, wins.

But this maxim apparently does not apply to intellectual activity in the group presentation task. In a 1983 article in *Studies of Higher Education*, Denis Fox discusses different metaphors of teaching. It seems to me that the *Gruppenreferat* emerges out of what Fox would call ‘transfer theory’: knowledge is understood as a commodity that students acquire and pass on to their peers. This commodity will take on a modified form during its transfer, in order to lighten other students’ load. Indeed, Bartsch and Rex write that the goal of the *Gruppenreferat* is the *Komprimierung*, or ‘compression’ of academic material. This sort of metaphor echoes those I read in official university descriptions of such group presentations while I studied in Germany. And its conceptualization of knowledge differs radically from the metaphor that governed the emergence of the seminar in eighteenth-century Germany. For this previous metaphor was one of natural growth (i.e. a student’s organic ideas) that is supported and shaped by competitive interaction (i.e. critical debate) in the seminar. This is a conception of the seminar in which received knowledge is the pre-condition, not the criteria for assessing the student in class.

The *Gruppenreferat*, then, does not further the historical ideal of individualism; it merely reiterates – even reduces – a topic to salient, accepted facts, with titbits of post-presentation discussion. As such, it aims to produce normative, fairly uniform individuals. Moreover, it does not contribute to what was historically the main purpose of the seminar, and officially still is the component of the seminar in Germany and abroad that most determines the student’s grade: the eventual term paper, or *Hausarbeit*. This is a substantial piece of work in which the student tackles a problem of his or her own choosing that is relevant to the overarching theme of the seminar series.

What I found unusual – and praiseworthy – about this latter requirement in present-day Germany is that no question or specific bibliography is usually given to the student by the university teacher; the student normally discusses the project in a ten or twenty-minute slot of an office hour, and so the work emerges in large part from independent study in the vacation following the seminar. Never have I learned so much about sustaining an argument or about the importance of reading selectively than when I negotiated the task of writing my own 20-sided German term

paper on my year abroad. Any guidance notes on how to write a *Hausarbeit* that I have read, regardless of professor or university, state that the finished product should be something rigorous, critical, original. The theory of such an assignment, therefore, is great. But the practice is not.

Because so little of our productive thinking takes place in a vacuum, and because so much of it can arise from challenging discussion, early presentation of and interrogation about one's ideas is vital for success in a term paper. The *Gruppenreferat* as an oral summary of facts and the *Hausarbeit* as a critical argument do not, then, operate in complementary functional distribution so as to further the learning process and together advance an individual's thought. Rather, the missed opportunity for an individual, argumentative review of a topic in a seminar means that the term paper is all the less likely to succeed. If a seminar is small enough for individual presentations, then one can present the required facts – the set of normative assumptions required to engage with a subject – in the form of an individual argument that can be tested on, even refuted by one's peers. And this argument can then take better shape at home on the page. A *Gruppenreferat* of consensus, meanwhile, does not give the student that opportunity to learn how to think and compete as an academic individual. The student instead has to learn this crucial skill for the most part not in the seminar, but alone at the computer desk. What's the point in that?

German governmental and higher education institutions, as well as grant-awarding bodies have long recognised the seminar problem. One recent solution has been to adopt the US approach to postgraduate education – which itself was once based on a German model – and offer a programme of high-level seminars and generous funding to a restricted number of students within a special track or stream attached to a university's humanities division, called a *Graduiertenschule* or *Graduiertenkolleg*. Such tracks are surely to be welcomed. At their conception, many German academics feared that *Verschulung* would be the result – i.e. that degrees would become more regimented and school-like. But a good, i.e. small and active seminar results, I argue, in the very opposite: a range of normalized, but individualized perspectives on a subject. Yet these special tracks, the *Graduiertenschulen*, are only open to doctoral students. The scheme is part of wider so-called 'initiatives of excellence' to create 'elite' research clusters and universities in a bid to make Germany more competitive on the international academic research market. I am aware of no plans to expand such *Graduiertenschulen* to master's students, perhaps because these are perceived as being one stage further away from

research against which Germany might be assessed. There seem to be no plans to make such publically-funded tracks specific to the master's stage. There are some private programmes in Germany, but these have by no means become the norm or even especially popular in the humanities.

The US, however, offers a precedent for both extension and specialism models: seminars are small in research institutions such as Berkeley, which offer a graduate programme that goes from post-BA to PhD. Other institutions, such as California State University Longbeach, may not have especially reputable undergraduate programmes and do not offer PhDs, but Longbeach has made a name for its master's programme in German, which has competitive entry and a rigorous syllabus comparable to course offerings at this level by other leading institutions.

The only solutions I experienced in Germany to reduce seminar participation numbers at the master's stage in the public university have been ad-hoc. For example, one professor in Trier effectively reduced entry into her seminar, which was a compulsory component of the degree her department offered, from 80 potential students to just 30, by setting an admission test alongside the usual prerequisites. The seminar was more stimulating than it would otherwise have been – I participated and only half of the presentations were *Gruppenreferate* – but it did mean that the seminar next door was all the more overcrowded, and it created an intellectual elitism among disciplines of a single subject, since this seminar became known as the most rigorous and the one for which students should save their intellectual energy.

I'll conclude with an appeal that relates to the higher education landscape here in the UK. Our current present political climate means that many of us are concerned about undergraduate education – and rightly so. Recent changes in governmental policy increase the pressure on at least English universities to find their own funding sources for undergraduate programmes, especially in the humanities. In departments with budget deficits and philanthropy-seeking initiatives that are still in their infancy, the paying master's student might seem an attractive stop-gap solution to meet financial shortfall. But there is the risk that this comes at an intellectual price. There appears to be an increasing general demand for master's courses in the UK, and it is a comparatively unregulated market. Since university teachers are already overstretched and departments may well be increasingly out of pocket, the seminar offers an attractive cost- and time-effective method of teaching a set of students who generate substantial income. Moreover, there is legitimate historical and international precedent for choosing the seminar as a means to mould

academically ‘normalized yet individualized’ personalities – our ideal university postgraduate. Yet the seminar only succeeds in this function if its number of participants remains low; its strength as a form of group but competitive learning is also its downfall, namely that the concept of group work is too easily expandable. This is an obvious objection to the seminar, but in Germany it has only been addressed with respect to a specific subset of students: the doctoral researcher. And so the early-stage postgraduate loses out. As master’s courses expand, it would concern me greatly if the German master’s model, dogged by high numbers and the *Gruppenreferat* were to be exported to the UK.