

Death of the Seminar Leader: Caleb Gattegno's *Silent Way* in Small Group Teaching

Introduction

Some of the most common problems in small group teaching for inexperienced seminar leaders, and many experienced ones, are reticent students, seminars dominated by a small number of voices, and discourses driven mainly by interventions from the teacher. This can often occur despite having all the right ingredients for a good session in place: an enthusiastic and approachable seminar leader, texts carefully scaffolded with cribs, and pre-seminar prep work. Managing and directing the discourse of a small group in a way that maximises general involvement is a skill which lies outside of subject expertise and belongs properly to the school of pedagogical methodology, in which most HE institutions provide little-or-no formal training. This exercise is a good way to coach students so they can communicate effectively in class with very little steer from the teacher.

Unspoken Rules of the Seminar Environment

All physical spaces are governed by unspoken social rules. In a small group HE environment the one everyone is immediately aware of is that the seminar leader is in charge, and that their communicative cues must be followed (David Jaques, 1991). For this reason in most classrooms the element with the highest disruptive potential is the teacher themselves, because through both action and inaction in conversation, they implicitly set the rules for what modes of conversation are permissible and what kinds of comments meet their approval, and are therefore desirable. While being extremely affable and supportive can alleviate this effect somewhat, in that students will feel freer to make bolder, more speculative statements and feel able to speak up more, it does not remove it entirely. In fact, the very positive teacher, like the very negative authority-based teacher, is still engaged in a basic structure of hierarchical approval where they are the centre of attention, and is still essentially running a closed system. The capacity for this discursive system to encourage thinking along certain patterns has sometimes been called the 'hidden curriculum' (Jackson 1968).

Some seminar leaders have created formal rules for small group discussions that are designed to overrule the implicit social cues of the classroom. These are seen most frequently in creative writing classrooms, where the higher emotional stakes around students' written work requires more sensitive discursive management. Google can bring up a dozen examples of these. But formal rules do not themselves ensure a directed and open flow of student peer contribution, and don't necessarily solve the problem of the teacher's involvement. [1] I suggest that it can be effective to allow social/discursive rules to come from students more organically, and for students to learn how to engage in a constructive, inclusive seminar themselves – guided, but not instructed, by the seminar leader.

The Silent Way

Caleb Gattegno was a language teacher who developed the Silent Way, a pedagogical method that minimised the involvement of the teacher. Closely related to the Communicative method, which suggests a desire to make oneself understood is the key driver of language acquisition, principles drawn from the Silent Way can be very useful tools outside of language teaching, particularly early on in a course or module when you're trying to establish an inclusive, open and directed discursive environment.

Given the view that the seminar leader is often the main impediment to open and directed discourse, the benefits of Gattegno's approach are obvious. By not talking, the teacher lessens their involvement in the assumed social rules of the group, and puts the onus on the students to decide the rules of their own discourse. **This is not the same as the students talking together outside of class.** Even silent, the teacher is physically present, watching and listening, and is in fact made very conspicuous indeed by their silence. Students will know that you expect them to move towards their educational goal even if you say nothing – they are in class. The difference is, without your approval, disapproval or involvement, they will have to turn to their peers for this instead, and by doing so enter into a proper discussion that is driven by them and implicitly supervised by the teacher.

There are many ways to use this kind of silence to great effect, but of course, a teacher cannot simply slap *The Wasteland* on the table and sit in silence for an hour (though I would like to see this, and it is probably feasible at MA level in the first seminar as a Learning Needs Analysis tool). It is important, especially for 1st year students, to give directions about the principles of good discussion, and to be ready to jump in if things take an odd turn or you have an unfortunate student personality present. The following activity is an example of this that I have used several times, especially at the start of term. Ideally it would be used in the second seminar, as the first will necessarily have more Teacher Talking Time for informative reasons and for informal chat. This has helped me greatly in establishing open discursive environments early on, building student confidence and showing the power of peer-support.

Example Exercise: Death of the Seminar Leader

Remain completely silent throughout.

1. Enter the classroom 5 minutes early and put one of these handouts on every space a student will sit, along with the chosen text/poem/essay/extract you are teaching.

Instructions

*Welcome to the seminar. For this activity, you will be talking together as a group **without the involvement of the seminar leader.***

Read [the text] for [five] minutes on your own, making notes [paying special attention to XYZ]. When [timer/clap/whistle etc.] goes off, you have [ten] minutes to discuss the text. **Do this as a whole group, not just with the person next to you.** Take turns speaking, and make an effort to respond to the point made by the last speaker, rather than starting a completely new train of thought.

Tips for a constructive discussion:

- Try to articulate your whole argument clearly: don't make others 'guess' your argument.
- Refer to the text for evidence – don't generalise but look at specific quotes.
- Listen to the person speaking and address their point – even if you disagree, this is better than talking over them.
- Try to include everyone – if you get into a back-and-forth with another student, invite other perspectives from the group.
- If you are confident and have a lot to contribute, consider letting someone else have some room to take part.
- **IMPORTANT:** Sometimes the best conclusions don't come from agreeing or disagreeing, but of re-thinking the language of arguments and the way they interpret evidence. You may find it is more useful to 'revise' someone else's position rather than reject it in favour of something else.

2. When the students come in, use your hand to direct them to the seat. If they look at you expecting you to talk, point towards the handout.

3. When everyone is in the classroom and the realisation has dawned on them that you mean what it says on the handout, start your timer, preferably one with a loud beep. If you are using your phone or analogue watch, you could also: hold up a flashcard that says 'Begin reading – you have x minutes', or simply say, as tonelessly as possible, 'You have x minutes to read'.

4. Wait. This is fine, as they are all reading, you can read and make notes too, or do the register. Avoid eye contact.

5. Depending on your timing method, either let the alarm go off, hold up a flashcard saying 'Begin discussion', clap, whistle or say as tonelessly as possible 'Begin discussion'.

6. Wait. This is the most difficult stage, as the urge to speak and get involved will be overwhelming. Sometimes, students will sit in absolute silence for up to 5 minutes before they talk, but, *trust me, they always will eventually.* The fact this stage takes so long and is so hard to do is the clearest evidence you ever need that seminars leaders dominate the classroom.

7. Once the students start to speak, take notes on their conversations, and where necessary, move around the classroom pointing at the prompts on the sheet when they are going wrong. For example, if one student is talking too long, you silently move over to them and point to the prompt which says 'If you are confident and have a lot to contribute, consider letting someone else have some room to take part'. Alternatively, have a copy of the handout written/projected on a whiteboard and gently rap your knuckles on it to get their attention, and point at the prompt in question. This can be better, as everyone can see what you're doing.
8. When they're done / out of time depending on how you've implemented this, say 'Well done' and ask them how it was! You now have some students who have taken their first steps to staging a meaningful conversation on their own, and you've put discursive cues in place you can use in future that the students have now felt the value of themselves. You have a valuable page of notes based on their comments, and a launchpad for the rest of the seminar.

Conclusion

While this exercise is effective as it is, there are many other potential applications Silent Way principles, and while this form of exercise has been successfully tested, it could easily be changed to be done over 5 minutes, an hour or anything in between. I have found it great with modernist poetry, which often provoke complex and often-contradictory interpretations, the ensuing conversations inviting students to work out how to articulate constructive disagreement and publicly change their minds. 15 minute 'Silent Sessions' can be built into a seminar series on a weekly basis, or used to start to solve a specific discursive problem occurring from an established group.

Notes

[1] There are several studies showing that seminar leaders often talk for between 60-80% of a session, and it remarkable how little this has changed in the last 30 years (Jaques and Salman 2007; Brown and Atkins 1988)

Bibliography

David Jaques and D Salman, *Learning in Groups*, 4th Ed., (London: Routledge, 2007)

George Brown and Madeleine Atkins, *Effective Teaching in Higher Education* (London: Routledge, 2002)

Caleb Gattegno, *Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools: The Silent Way*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Educational Solutions, 1972)