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# Opening Up the Conversation—and Students' Thinking

*Terry Roberts*

**A seminar format for student discussion can strengthen not just critical thinking, but also creative thinking.**

Imagine a group of 2nd graders engaged in a seminar-style discussion in a "learning cottage" (read: trailer) at an elementary school on the edge of a Southern city. Eighteen students along with the facilitator are seated in a circle on the carpet. The text under discussion is the classic 1–100 number chart. The class is using the Paideia Seminar approach for this conversation, with the expectation that all 18 students participate in the discussion at least twice.

By definition, a Paideia Seminar is a collaborative, intellectual dialogue facilitated through open-ended questions about a text. A *text* in this case may be any human artifact that embodies a rich web of ideas. The goal of consistent Paideia Seminar practice is to develop increased fluency in the language used to understand a cluster of ideas and the willingness to experience the cognitive dissonance that comes from considering multiple, even contradictory points of view. The various stages of the seminar cycle—close reading, formal discussion, process writing—teach mastery in the flow of language and ideas, while the entire process is meant to guide students to a more sophisticated understanding that lies beyond their initial response to a text.



Quail Hollow Middle School students in Charlotte, North Carolina, celebrate a creative seminar discussion. Photos by Jesse L. Roberts, JL Roberts Photography.

In a setting like this 2nd graders' discussion of the number chart, the role of seminar participants is to think seriously and creatively about the concepts under discussion, to share their thoughts by making statements and asking questions, and to listen with an open mind to others' statements. The seminar is designed to enhance the intellectual and social-emotional skills of students through consistent, deliberate practice. Teachers trained in this approach work hard to coach students' discrete speaking and listening skills so they all can participate fully in this exercise of the mind.

## Inspiring New Ways of Looking at Content

Halfway through the 2nd graders' interchange, the facilitator reminds students that full participation is the goal. She gives them the opportunity to turn and talk to a partner for a moment (addressing the question "What role does the tens column play in the structure of the chart?"). After a few moments of energetic talk among partners, the facilitator brings the whole group back to order and asks those who've so far talked the least to respond first.

One boy who hasn't spoken since the beginning of the seminar eagerly tells the group what happens to the numbers as they move across the rows in the chart to arrive at the tens column: "The zeros in the tens column are powerful ... they start the cycle of numbers over again." He adds, "It's like that life cycle we had in science. The numbers begin a new cycle of life at the end of the row .... It's kind of—they're reborn in the next row!" The rest of the

students grab this idea of being *reborn in a new cycle* and run with it, finding all sorts of cyclical patterns in the number chart.

Seminars using the Paideia approach can spark new ways of looking at concepts for teens, too. Imagine 23 students in a high school journalism class (in the same city as the 2nd-grade discussion, but in a school with a more diverse student population) experiencing a seminar with the Paideia format. Their common text is the United Nations' "Universal Declaration of Human Rights." The dialogue is focused on what it means to be human—in particular, what it means to be part of a human community. Much of the conversation deals with the various communities the students feel they're a part of and how those communities do—or do not—support the rights outlined in the text.

Near the end of the seminar, the facilitator asks a question that's not in the seminar plan but has arisen naturally during the discussion: "Which community that you belong to is most important in your life?" A student asks, "Do you mean which community is most important in terms of my identity?" The facilitator nods, and after several students offer reflections (having to do with being Southern, or American, or an immigrant), one thoughtful young woman says, "My answer is the LGBTQ community. A year ago, I couldn't have been this honest, but our discussion has inspired me to take a different perspective in response to the question. That's the community that most honors who I am."

Inspired by the candor of that young woman's comment, the rest of the students begin to discuss the idea of community in a more profound—some would say a more creative—way.



A teacher coaches students prior to a Paideia Seminar discussion at Quail Hollow Middle School. Photos by Jesse L. Roberts, JL Roberts Photography.

## Practicing Divergent Thinking

I've asked you to imagine these powerful classroom discussions. Luckily, I don't have to imagine them because in each instance, I was the facilitator. In my role as director of the National Paideia Center, I spend a lot of my working life in schools, planning seminars with teachers and modeling the strategies that foster in kids the critical thinking and communication skills that bear fruit in the social-emotional and intellectual realms.

In the definition of a Paideia Seminar given above, note the prominence of the word *collaborative* (not competitive). Meanwhile, *intellectual* as it's used in this definition means that the discussion is about concepts rather than facts, and a facilitator uses primarily *open-ended questions* to involve as many participants in the collective thinking and talking as possible and inspire a range of responses. In other words, divergent thinking is the norm. One common misconception about the Paideia Seminar is that it's intended to end in consensus, that by clever—and leading—questioning, the teacher can bring students to a common understanding of the text. However, consensus is never the desired end; the goal is for each student to come to a larger and more sophisticated understanding of the textual ideas, regardless of whether they agree with each other or the teacher.

Paideia leaders like myself have long argued that this seminar format can nurture critical thinking skills across the curriculum (Roberts & Billings, 2012) and lead to more sophisticated writing (Daugherty, Billings, & Roberts, 2016). The seminars described above, however, reveal a different attribute of seminar discussions. They showcase how students can use the seminar environment to practice creative thinking. By creative, I mean that students (1) express and explore new, unexpected reactions to the seminar text; and (2) synthesize a variety of different responses to construct much more sophisticated, personal views. In short, participants can learn to practice divergent rather than convergent thinking.

In our increasingly fractured and challenge-filled world, the ability to produce creative rather than standardized responses to a problem is a necessary skill in all facets of adult life, both personal and professional. In my 2019 book *The New Smart: How Nurturing Creativity Will Help Children Thrive*, I argue that it's the creative rather than the "smart" personality that will succeed in 2050. Collaborative, creative thought—precisely the kind of thinking nurtured in true classroom dialogue—may well rule in the next 50 years. In that world, successful children and adults will:

Blend multiple intelligences in a way that might be described as synthetic or even "symphonic."

Be ambitious and focused without being self-obsessed.

Value asynchrony and even seek it out.

Use their own marginality, when it empowers them, to generate a novel perspective and new work.

Exhibit resilience in all areas of life.

Be measured by what they produce over the course of their lives, not by any static notion of capacity or quotient.

I believe that in the social and professional environment of the coming decades, prosperity will result from creative responses to complex, shifting challenges. Life itself will likely feel volatile and unpredictable, leaving most of us with the sense of being out of rhythm. Successful individuals will be inspired, rather than defeated, by this sense of asynchrony. In anticipation of that world, students need to think about the curriculum, not just consume and regurgitate it, to redraw the box and then think outside it. And they should do so both as individuals—such as in certain writing, speaking, artistic, or research projects—and in concert with others.



Students take part in a seminar discussion at Quail Hollow Middle School. Photos by Jesse L. Roberts, JL Roberts Photography.

The notion that we must stress the social nature of creative schooling and encourage novel thinking was reinforced as early as 1997 in the American Psychological Association's findings about how humans learn. Consider the eighth principle, focused in part on the individual:

The learner's creativity, higher order thinking, and natural curiosity all contribute to motivation to learn. Intrinsic motivation is stimulated by tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal interests, and providing for personal choice and control.

And the eleventh principle about working with others:

Learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others.

In the environment these principles describe, the group is inspired by each individual insight, and the individual is galvanized by the group vision.

## Open-Ended Questions

When you combine textual ambiguity with truly open-ended questions from a skilled facilitator, the result is the widest possible range of perspectives, which students can then synergize in increasingly sophisticated ways. The open-ended nature of seminar questions is especially significant in this context. In too many traditional classrooms during the last 50 years, "teacher questions" have been designed to lead students to the one right answer, the predetermined curricular point. Teachers have constructed questions—consciously or unconsciously—to drive convergent thinking and discourage divergent thinking. This practice has become all the more common in the age of high-stakes testing.



4th graders at Providence Spring Elementary in Charlotte, North Carolina, discuss the text of a speech by a Native American Chief. Photos by Jesse L. Roberts, J.L. Roberts Photography.

The Paideia Seminar rejects this long-standing paradigm by featuring both texts and questioning strategies intended to inspire a wide range of student answers. In the world of the seminar circle, intellectual creativity is not just accepted; it's the engine that drives the

discussion. For this reason, experienced facilitators will often push a group of student participants to articulate not just a few, but a multitude of answers in response to an open-ended question—and then push them to juxtapose those multiple answers in creative ways. The synthesis of perspectives that emerges from a wide-ranging, fluent seminar explains more of the world than any one person's insight did in the beginning.

## Better Writing

Student writing is often more sophisticated and coherent after a seminar than before. As my colleagues and I discuss in *The Better Writing Breakthrough* (Daugherty, Billings, & Roberts, 2016), the key to helping reluctant writers discover that they have something to say—and the words to say it with—is often a rich classroom discussion that precedes the writing process.

Drawing a direct connection between a classroom seminar and the writing prompt that follows it helps students bridge the gap between conversation and composition; that's why Paideia's recent seminar plans feature a "Transition to Writing" stage that helps students use what they said, heard, and thought during the discussion in their writing. This process helps students create written products in which they synthesize multiple perspectives in ingenious ways.<sup>1</sup>

My observations in schools have shown me (and teachers have confirmed) that, in addition to writing skills, other forms of student expression become more creative after students experience a Paideia Seminar. Student artwork is often more complex and varied, problem solving is more fluid and creative, and student self-awareness and awareness of others becomes more mature.

## Creativity Spurs Creativity

I began this exploration into teaching creative thinking through dialogue by describing two Paideia Seminar discussions in which individual students generated ideas that inspired the other participants. In both the 2nd-grade seminar on the 1–100 chart and the high school journalism seminar on the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," one student's struggle to articulate a new insight ignited the thinking of others in a way the teacher/facilitator could never have anticipated. What these two examples, along with dozens of others, teach us is that we need to expand our ideas about what seminar participation teaches to include *creative* as well as *critical* thinking.

Creative people blend their various mental resources to not just provide new answers but ask entirely new questions. Classroom dialogue can be an incubator for this sort of creative questioning and divergent replies. Furthermore, as our students grow more accustomed to

approaching an ambiguous text in inventive ways, they'll begin to think collaboratively in ways that go beyond synthesis. I like to call this further stage of creative thinking *symphonic*, because it blends the multitude of insights expressed by various minds in a dialogue into something rich and novel—perhaps even something beautiful: a symphony of ideas.

## References

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Roberts, T. (2019). *The new smart: How nurturing creativity will help children thrive*. Nashville, TN: Turner.

Roberts, T., & Billings, L. (2012). *Teaching critical thinking: Using seminars for 21st century literacy*. Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> For examples of fully developed Paideia Seminar plans, visit the National Paideia Center website at [paideia.org/our-approach/paideia-seminar/sample-paideia-seminar-plans](http://paideia.org/our-approach/paideia-seminar/sample-paideia-seminar-plans).

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Terry Roberts is director of the National Paideia Center in Asheville, North Carolina.