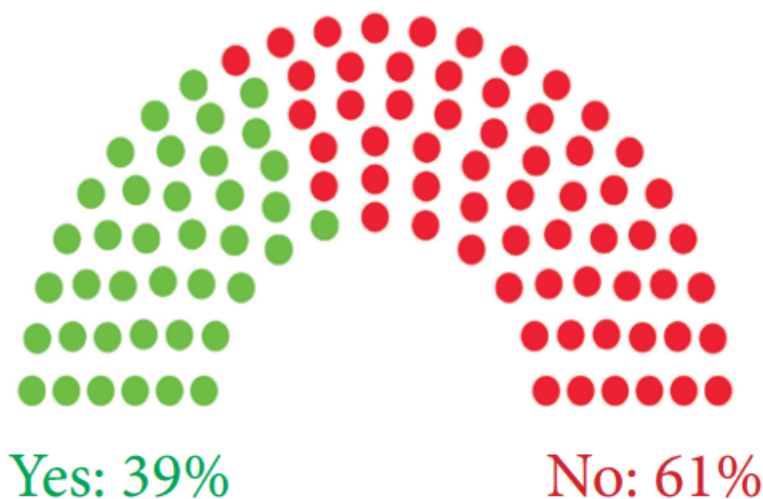


CLASH OF COMMENTS: Should seminars be an assessed part of university degrees?

By [Ed Smith](#) and [Stella Newing](#)
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Should seminars be an assessed part of University degrees?



Source: Nouse

YES. - Ed Smith

Seminars are the lifeblood of any arts or social science degree as it enables students to challenge, share and contribute ideas across a myriad of topics. However, when a seminar is strangled by silence, because the majority are inadequately prepared, the development and learning of each student withers.

Discussion in seminars is essential and improves key life skills by encouraging communication and bolstering confidence, which are crucial in any future graduate level career. Furthermore even when applying to a job in Waitrose a shelf stacker you have to deliver a pitch to a group about a chosen item that is sold in store.

Nonetheless, not to get sidetracked by Waitrose, the growth in confidence and flow of ideas in a seminar will indefinitely lead to greater debate and thus greater learning for all as I do not know anyone who has learnt effectively from a two way conversation between one student and a seminar leader.

Moreover, if seminars were to be assessed, it would be an easy way to push marks up, even if it the

assessment does not have a significant weight to it, merely by contributing once or twice per seminar. This in turn promotes the completion of set reading and actually turning up to seminars. I have more often than not seen sixteen names on a sheet and counted only three people present, including myself, detrimentally affecting all involved.

It is clear that the opposition to my view will rebuke the claim, stating that people with anxiety and conditions that prevent them from either participating in discussion or turning up, will be severely disadvantaged if seminars were to be assessed. This is a strong and convincing argument.

Nevertheless, becoming more comfortable with fellow classmates, by discussing set reading or how your day has been, may help reduce stress and the anxiety of public speaking, especially as seminars are usually made up of no more than twenty people. Furthermore, nervousness can be harnessed into more positive energy such as adrenaline, additionally helping those suffering from mental illnesses.

I am not contending that seminars should be assessed solely on contributions to the class as a whole. Assessment could occur when class discussion breaks off into small groups to discuss more in depth, which would help those who suffer from anxiety about public speaking become more comfortable with adding to class discussion.

Topics and ideas discussed in seminars are key to the greater performance of students, and I have incorporated many of the ideas that I discussed, which were directed effectively by my seminar leader into coursework pieces, demonstrating how seminars can help one personally develop.

Therefore seminars should be assessed, especially within the arts, humanities and social sciences, because they are a platform for informal exchange where ideas can be refined and applied. This helps personal development by strengthening confidence and pushing people to prepare adequately, which are both key skills in any career after graduation.

NO. - Stella Newing

Seminars are one of the most rewarding and stimulating aspects of my degree. It's a chance to test out new ideas, learn from your peers, and receive feedback, all of which I think should be able to be enjoyed without the pressure of assessment. Crucially, a seminar is not rehearsed; it is impromptu discussion, normally with only a loose structure prepared by the tutor. Can that unpredictable setting ever really be a reflection of someone's best work? You can prepare as much as you like for a seminar and still not necessarily be able to contribute to the level that you'd like in every part of the discussion.

If I'm honest, I find the idea of relying on other people for a portion of my grade problematic. We've all been there in a seminar when you feel like you're the only one talking. This isn't me saying: "I'm amazing, everyone else is rubbish", because obviously that's not the case and I don't think that. But sometimes you end up in a seminar group where not everyone is as responsive as you'd hope, or the conversation doesn't progress to cover interesting and important topics, so you don't get to showcase the work you've prepared.

I get it, that's the point of a seminar. And it's true that the assessments often encourage attendance and participation. But I do think that you should feel satisfied that the mark you've received is a result of your work and effort alone.

I feel the same about group presentations: they're excellent practice and invaluable preparation for The Real World but not the same objective method of testing as an essay or exam. Seminars do not have the benefit of anonymity that written assessment does; it is no longer wholly unbiased marking. Of course, the markers are experienced professionals and are not going to be swayed by personal preference, but many students have voiced issues with the grading system for seminars. It is a far more tenuous method of marking that is, naturally, difficult to keep fully consistent.

For the people who don't contribute that much in seminars, this is a really serious argument as well. Some people find the seminar a very intimidating environment, and it is not a place where they can

produce the excellent work that they are capable of. I realised fairly early on in my first term at university that I had to make a conscious decision to shelve my embarrassment and shyness in seminars, and offer answers even if I thought they weren't right or any good. Not being a particularly confident or outspoken person, this took some effort and, while I'm very glad I was able to make that decision, not everyone does or can. I don't think someone should be penalised for not thriving in what is a pretty intense academic setting, where they may be suppressing original and insightful ideas.

I can see that there are a couple of subjects, such as Law, for which seminars are a more relevant method of assessment, as communication skills are vital. Generally speaking though, seminars should be an opportunity to experiment, talk, and listen. It is not the ideal method of assessment, so why do it? Keep it as a place to prepare for essays and exams, rather than add even more pressure to our academic timetable.



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