

The 21st Century Seminar

The 21st Century Seminar - what is it? In our session on the character of the 21st century seminar, we sparked the conversation with words from Professors A, B, and C.

Professor A says: Despite all the advances, technology really doesn't make much of a difference in the classroom.

There is-or there should be-no such thing as the new 21st century seminar. The cognitive moves a graduate student must make to master a body of knowledge have not changed just because there are computers in the building. You must show students how to define terms, how to build a sense of historical and social context, how to test idea against case, how to shape a complex argument sentence by sentence, and how to document the work so others who follow can pick up the trail. Mastery is mastery is mastery. Around the seminar table graduate students demonstrate that they have prepared the reading, that they have worked out relationships between the texts, and that they have readied themselves to advance and defend their ideas and challenge the ideas of others. Nothing about the seminar has changed except in those circles which are dominated by academic fashion.

Professor B says: Technology is a tremendous benefit to student learning.

The networked classroom is the handiest tool since dustless chalk. When a student asks about some detail, you can instantly look it up. You can have maps, film clips, and pithy quotations from the greats up on the screen at a moment's notice. You can vary the pace of the session by moving from conversation to media and back again. Your graduate students can access far larger collections of journals and primary sources online than most schools can afford in print. Television and gaming have changed the attention spans of today's students, but we can use the same electronic media to hook them on learning. The new seminar can be fast-moving, dynamic, and well-aimed at the strengths and interests of today's students, while circumnavigating their weaknesses. We're crazy not to use these tools to spark our courses and make our school lives more efficient and attractive.

Professor C says: Technology offers endless possibilities.

The seminar will never be the same. With the new media, our students can trade ideas with students on the other side of the world, and their conversations can be recorded and published instantly. We can return to these recordings and transcripts to reflect further, challenging ourselves with the specifics of the positions represented there. If we're brave enough, it gets much better. Our students can collaborate with people outside the academy-experts, witnesses, innovators, and others who can now readily enter the conversation of the seminar. The classroom becomes an infinitely fluid and malleable social space; knowledge becomes the work of anyone who wants to participate; authority opens itself to the wider society in a way it never has done before. While academics still have specialized work to do, a wildly more democratic model of inquiry begins to emerge.

And a fourth position or a synthesis? Is there a Professor D? We speculated about the nature of this ideal creature during the final portion of the session.