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The three part seminar: theatre, skeletons and meta-analyses

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The three part seminar: Theatre, skeletons and meta-analyses

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As Michaelmas Term 2017 begins, the Teaching and Learning Centre's Dr Erik Blair considers how learners can benefit when the beginning, the middle and the end of seminars are clearly signalled.

Some aspects of theatre drive me mad. I may be a novice, but I have managed to separate the form into two groups – plays where I know the end has come and plays where I don't! Shakespeare plays and whodunnits are in the former group –I can see that the play has come to a climax because the murderer has been identified, or the cast are lying dead on stage. In the second group … we get to what I think is the end… but I am left unsure. Perhaps all the characters freeze; perhaps a character delivers a mournful monologue then stares off into space, or the lights suddenly go out. I then ask myself "Should I clap now?" The best play that I have ever seen (according to my naïve dualism) was a production of Oedipus Rex. I won't spoil the ending, but the structure is perfect. A group of a characters known as 'the Chorus' walk on stage and tell you what the play is about and what you will see. Then the play happens. Then 'the Chorus' return and tell you what you have just witnessed. There is a very clear three part structure with a beginning, middle and end. The structure is shared with the audience- we can then concentrate on the content.

If teaching has a clear beginning, middle and end then students might be better able to focus on content. Obviously, in a seminar, the group has a timetable that tells everyone when things will start and when things will end, but the way that such events are signalled and the ingredients that make up these events is what really matters. Using a three part seminar structure is not only useful in arranging teaching so that students feel they are learning within an organised framework, it is also a great planning tool that allows teachers to work within a purposeful structure. Teachers shouldn't feel restrained by such an approach. Instead they may wish to consider the benefits of have a pre-defined system. Let me explain with the help of crabs, jellyfish and humans.

Crabs have exoskeletons that constrain their growth and offer little flexibility. Jellyfish have the opposite problem – they have gelatinous bodies that are constantly in motion and constantly impacted by external forces. Humans have an endoskeleton – our spines are on the inside: they give us flexibility within certain planes of movement; they let us grow, and they keep everything else in place. Using a three part seminar is akin to having an endoskeleton. There is structure and organisation but there is also flexibility that is at the beck and call of the individual teacher. And, what's more, the endoskeletal three part seminar offers a form that is familiar to students – allowing them to feel comfortable in the knowledge that things are organised and purposeful.

The three part structure also helps highlight what is possible within a seminar and helps reduce the potential for the over-stuffing of content. When I plan a seminar, I allow seven minutes at the start for settling in and sharing what is going to be taught/learned. I then teach the seminar (which is usually a series of student-led learning events). Finally, I use the last five minutes for us, as a class, to review what we have done/learned. Viewed in this way, teachers might get a better idea about what is possible to be taught/learned within the central phase of

the seminar and will avoid filling seminars with so much content that the session is packed full and the end of the seminar is only signalled by the sudden noticing of the clock, “Oh, is that the time! We’d better stop there. We’ll pick this up next time” [Exeunt stage left].

Some might feel that this three part approach impedes their individuality and freedom. And it might. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t consider it. Teaching, like every other job, has some hoops through which we must jump and some shared wisdom that we should be open to. Academics work in an evidence-based world – if the argument against using a three part seminar structure is merely that someone doesn’t want to, then the counter-argument is to be found in the research base. John Hattie, Professor of Education and Director of the Melbourne Education Research Institute at the University of Melbourne, is a man who likes meta-analysis. In fact, his work involves meta-analyses of meta-analyses. He has built up a data set of over 1200 meta-analyses that examine what actually makes a difference in education. From such work he can tell you the effect size of almost any educational intervention. He can tell you that homework and single-sex schooling have almost no effect on learning and he can tell you that classroom discussion and teacher credibility have large effect sizes. From his work on Higher Education (Hattie, 2015) he reports that some of the strategies that make the biggest difference involve sharing learning intentions (what is to be learned) at the start; having a clear scaffold around the learning events, and giving meaningful feedback (what has been learned). Personally, I would like Hattie to turn his eye to examining theatre, but, in the meantime, I am happy to be guided by data and stick with the three part seminar.

Hattie, J. 2015. The applicability of Visible Learning to higher education. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 1(1), p.79-91.