

Best practices during seminars to increase student engagement at the ID Department

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Background

The Department of International Development at LSE is characterized by the diverse backgrounds of its students and academics. Each one of them brings a unique perspective to the class. The nature of the topics covered in most ID Courses leads to having active conversations during seminars. Some of the literature in Education Sciences suggests that the more. (Wang, 2014) actively engaged students are, the more likely they are to learn and attain their academic goals Previous Changemakers' research on the factors that encourage and discourage seminar participation found that 35% of respondents think that seminars are crucial elements in their education at LSE, while 39% think seminars are probably an important element in their education at LSE. (Kerroux, 2021) Additionally, Kohlmann's (2020) research shows the language barriers that ID MSc students who are completing their first English-language degree face in LSE seminars such as finding it difficult to jump into unstructured conversation during seminars due to extra time needed to formulate comments.

Differentiating my project from previous ones, the aim of this study is to analyze the current styles used in seminars taught in the ID Department during the Winter Term and identify good and bad practices. Although every professor in the department has the liberty to choose the way they want to conduct seminars, this project provides recommendations to LSE Directorate and Seminar Leaders to improve the experience of students during seminars by promoting better practices. My main motivation for choosing this research question is realizing that in some seminars, there were some students who were not participating in the discussions, despite having some controversial, provoking topics on the table. In accordance with the LSE 2030 goals for peer inclusion, I hope this work will help the LSE community to have more engaging seminars where all students feel part of the discussion.

“I barely spoke in that seminar; it was always a discussion. I just sat down, and no one noticed it.”

Methodology

The participants: Taught master's students from LSE International Development who were recruited from the ID Department Facebook page, WhatsApp groups of ID programs, and the ID weekly Newsletters. All the participants attended at least two courses in the ID Department in person during Autumn and Winter Terms

The focus groups: 3 focus groups were conducted for the required data collection with 15 participants in total. All the focus groups were conducted in person at LSE. Each one lasted between 50-60 minutes. The participants received a voucher as a way of thanking them for their time spent.

The interviews: Three semi-structured interviews were conducted with seminar leaders of 20 minutes each.

Data collection chronology: All the focus groups were carried out during week 7 and week 8 of Winter Term. Once I had identified specific seminars that had outstanding reviews, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the seminar leaders during the first week of the summer term.

Data Analysis and Findings

Ideas came from the participants themselves shaping the research into a bottom-up analysis. During the discussions, there were some challenges as participants had different preferences on the best approaches to conducting a seminar. The participants reflected on the quality of the seminar considering the perspectives of extrovert and introvert students. Each focus group revealed both positive and negative aspects that students experienced during seminars at LSE. After analyzing the transcripts of the interviews and focused groups, some categories were identified. Some of the findings can be summarized in the following table:

		Small Discussions	Short Presentations	Long Presentations	Voluntary Participation	Mandatory Participation	Debates	Predictability in class	Quizzes	Simulations
DV400	Development: History, Policy and Practice	Always	Never	Always	Always	Nver	Sometimes	Always	Never	Always
DV415	Global Environmental Governance	Never	Never	Never	Always	Never	Never	Never	Never	Always
DV418	African Development	Sometimes	Never	Never	Always	Never	Never	Never	Sometimes	Never
DV420	Complex Emergencies	Sometimes	Never	Always	Always	Never	Sometimes	Always	Sometimes	Never
DV433	The Informal Economy and Development	Sometimes	Never	Always	Always	Never	Never	Always	Never	Never
DV454	Gender and labour markets in the Global South	Never	Never	Always	Always	Never	Never	Never	Never	Never
DV455	Advocacy, Campaigning and Grassroots Activism	Always	Never	Always	Always	Never	Sometimes	Sometimes	Never	Always
DV457	Sexual and Reproductive Health Programmes	Sometimes	Never	Always	Always	Never	Never	Always	Never	Never
DV460	Bayesian Reasoning for Qualitative Social Science	Always	Never	Never	Always	Never	Never	Always	Always	Sometimes
DV462	Forced Migration and Refugees	Always	Always	Never	Sometimes	Sometimes	Sometimes	Never	Never	Sometimes
DV492	Economic Development Policy III	Sometimes	Never	Always	Always	Never	Sometimes	Always	Never	Never

References

Kerroux, Selma and Turiere, Nikola (2021) What are the linguistic and cultural challenges of studying online for second-language English postgraduate students?. LSE Chagemakers 2020-2021 Accessible at: <https://info.lse.ac.uk/current-students/part-of-lse/assets/documents/Change-makers/research-gallery/34a-hybrid-learning-second-language-full-report.pdf>

Kohlmann, Mary (2020) 'How do ID MSc students who are completing their first English-language degree encounter and navigate language barriers in LSE seminars?'. LSE Change Makers 2019-2020. Accessible at: <https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Eden-Centre/Assets-EC/Documents/Change-makers/48-Language-Barriers.pdf>

Wang, Ming-Te (2014) Staying Engaged: Knowledge Needs in Student Engagement. Pub Med Central. DOI: 10.1111/cdep.12073

Recommendations

- **Removing unassessed, long presentations from seminars.** There was consensus among participants in focus groups that when presentations extend too long during seminars, students tend to stop paying attention. Some professors say at the beginning of the course that presentations should not exceed 10 minutes, however, this policy is poorly enforced. As presentations are unassessed, the quality and time dedicated to each presentation vary from student to student. Professors might have an incentive to let students have long presentations as this requires less class preparation. Long presentations can be a good alternative, but only when students receive feedback before the seminar to assure the high quality of the presentation. Considering the disruptions there are during the term (Industrial Actions), some students do not get the chance to present, therefore removing the presentation would lead to having a more equal experience.
- **Implementing "Engagement silence".** A professor in the department has a very popular practice among students, called "engagement silence". When she asks a question, she waits for one minute, and then she allows responses. This way students who speak English as a second language have some time to formulate their responses. Some students think very carefully before opening their mouths, and by the time they do, the topic has changed.
- **Organizing discussions among department staff for knowledge sharing.** During the interviews conducted with professors, some seem very interested in learning about what their colleagues are doing to increase engagement during seminars. Holding a session before the term begins can be a good way to get some fresh ideas.
- **Gradually moving from small group discussions to large ones.** More introverted students or those who speak English as a second language feel more comfortable speaking in small groups at first. Therefore, small discussions are suggested only while participation in large groups is limited. Extrovert students will always find a chance to speak, either in small or large discussions.