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“Spreading and Extending It Out”: The Omnilog Classroom

John Ludy

... a man's discourse was like a rich Persian carpet, the beautiful figures and patterns of which can be shown only by spreading and extending it out; when it is contracted and folded up, they are obscure and lost.

—Plutarch

Four years ago I was frustrated. I was buried under sheaves of student papers. I was burnt out by the constant and unrealistic demands made by mandated standards and mass testing. I yearned for a saner and more humane classroom.

Today, things are much the same yet very different.

I still have stacks of student papers to read, but they're more enjoyable to read and certainly more enlightening. I'm still pressured by mandated standards and statewide tests. Still, I believe I've found a way to meet these stringent demands AND create a more humane, more positive classroom.

Over the last several years I've developed a classroom model that is constantly evolving and multi-pronged. Called the “Omnilog Framework,” it is a blend of Socratic seminars, alternative assessment, and reflective composition.

For my students and me the results have been dramatic.

What are Socratic seminars?

The Socratic seminar is an inquiry-based, constructivist classroom method. It usually involves three distinct phases:

1. Participants are asked to study a text.
2. Participants seminar over the text.
3. Participants orally reflect on the seminar in which they just took part.

Such a bare-bones summary of the seminar process gives the reader no idea of how rich and intellectually stimulating a seminar can be. Perhaps these student comments may give a clearer picture of what seminars are like:

“Seminars help me expand my mind. They help us think through different situations. They also help me communicate my thoughts and feelings to other people.”

“Seminars help you see other points of view and understand them. They help a lot with your patience, listening, and understanding skills, too.”

“Seminars help me learn to voice my opinion. When I'm comfortable around my peers, then I'll be more comfortable around other people.”

One basic premise of seminars is that all participants should be encouraged to reflect hon-

estly on a completed seminar. This idea led me eventually toward the Omnilog Framework.

How does alternative assessment fit in the Omnilog Framework?

It was a short jump from oral reflections about a completed seminar to written assessments. At first I had students write short reflections (usually only a few sentences long) about a seminar so I might better consider how to improve my own performance. When I did this, I found that in each class there were some highly observant, very quiet students who wrote clearly and beautifully but said little in reflection.

Soon, I began giving students a short response form after each seminar. When I sat down to grade them, I found that reading these responses was actually enjoyable.

Over time, this alternative assessment idea has evolved toward its present form.

Students are asked to reflect orally and in writing on all completed seminars in my class. Depending on circumstances, they are asked to assess their own, their class (we call this their "community"), or other individual student's performances.

These assessments NEVER involve numerical scoring. I find that numbers have all sorts of significances to students that make them play games rather than be honest. Rather, assessors receive grades based on thoughtful completion of the various assessment instruments.

Further, these instruments change constantly during a course year. These changes reflect my own curiosity about student views of their particular "community of learners." Also, such changes prevent the process from stagnating. An added bonus is that these alterations make grading a powerful learning experience for me.

Finally, the instruments lead students to observe more carefully, assess more deeply, and write more complex performance reviews. This not only builds their awareness of seminar and community benchmarks; it also fits my

course's composition program.

How is the Omnilog reflective writing program designed?

My ninth-grade composition curriculum has always been based on a standard four-step writing process. First, students write clear compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences. Next, they write several types of paragraph such as chronological order, spatial, contrast, etc. Then they write parts of an essay. Finally, they assemble these parts and compose several complete five-paragraph essays.

Last year, however, I began to link this four-step process to students' seminar assessment by developing alternative assessment instruments mirroring the process. Thus far, this link seems to dovetail well with students' evolving sense of group and personal benchmarks. It has also made the class structure more organic.

Thus, early in the course students are asked to assess the group's seminar performances by writing complete sentences (Figure 1). Subsequent assessment instruments push them toward more complex sentences.

At the second level, students assess the group's seminar performances by writing a variety of paragraphs (Figure 2).

In the third stage of the writing process, students eventually assess by writing a thesis statement, three body paragraphs, and a concluding paragraph (Figure 3).

At the complete essay level, they are asked to write a year-end seminar performance review with citations from earlier instruments kept in their portfolios. As an instructor, this final essay provides me with a real sense of how well individual students have developed their observation and composition skills during the course year.

Three student submissions I received last week at the third level (thesis, body and concluding paragraphs) indicate the dual progress students make in observing/assessing performance and writing clear essays.

Students had been split into two immersion seminar groups. This meant that half the

students seminared over a text while the other half observed. Then we reversed the process. Since we have seminared often and I believe the group's abilities have improved, I used six total texts for this pair of seminars. Two were art works . . . Woods' *American Gothic* and Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. The other four were poems. Two were by Alice Walker, one by e.e. cummings, and the last was Shakespeare's "Sonnet 116." All in some way dealt with the overall topic of love, which fit nicely with the course's current literature, *Romeo and Juliet*.

The samples are unedited and reflect three different student perspectives on the same seminar.

Student Sample One:

This seminar was good considering it was a new experience.

There weren't many arguments. First, Barrett didn't have an opportunity to argue, because I wasn't in his group. Second, instead of shouting at each other, everyone used 'I agree' and 'I disagree.' Last, because of the personalities of each person involved in that particular group, arguing was avoided.

Not only was there little arguing, there was also active participation. First of all, Allie actually talked! Because of the size of the group, Angie felt more comfortable expressing her thoughts. Due to the small size of the group, everyone was able to get a word or two in without being overlooked. Just as the participation rate was higher, active listening was practiced. For example, while Kelly was talking, people paid attention and no one interrupted her. Also, when Barrett was talking, no one else was. Further, everyone was listening to each other, and they commented on each other's thoughts.

Because this seminar was a new experience, it wasn't bad. There weren't nearly as many arguments as normal, and there was a greater amount of participation. Everyone listened and communicated well with each other. All in all, this seminar was decent.

Student Sample Two:

This seminar had its good and bad points.

A good point of the seminar was that everyone expressed his or her opinions. I heard a lot of people talk that don't normally talk. It was the first time that everyone who had something on their mind let it be known. Everyone participating made the seminar more interesting.

While it was good that everyone expressed their opinions, they needed to not do it all at once. This seminar had a lot of side seminars. All the extra talking made it hard to follow everything. As a result, some observers quit listening.

Along with side seminars, interruptions brought down the quality of the seminar. Certain people continually interrupted others. This made many people stop trying to voice their opinions. The facilitator tried to bring this under control but couldn't.

As you can see, the seminar was okay overall. Many people voiced their opinions. However, side seminars and interruptions brought the quality of the seminar down. Clearly, side seminars and interruptions destroy seminars.

Student Sample Three:

This seminar has some bad and good qualities.

There wasn't any fighting throughout the seminar. First of all, when someone gave their opinion everyone would try to consider it. Then, they would say what they thought of it. Throughout it, everyone tried to see different points of view. All in all, the group worked hard not to argue.

Not only was there no fighting, but also there were a lot of different opinions. First, Jennifer said that there is something boys have called "The Look." Then, Jessica said "The Look" means that someone likes you. Later, Alicia added that everyone has their own personal look. In conclusion, the different opinions made great discussions.

There were good discussions; however, there wasn't 100% participation. First of all, a couple people led the seminar. Second, some people talked a little but not enough. Most important, a few people just

sat there and didn't say anything. But they did listen. Clearly, these few people that didn't speak up could have made the seminar better.

As you can see, there were many good and bad qualities in this seminar. There wasn't any fighting, and there were many different opinions. There just wasn't enough participation. Clearly, the seminar was good and only had a few flaws.

Reading these student papers is more than a chore for me. It is also a "reality check." I find out more than whether or not students understand the use of interparagraph links. I also find out their perceptions of the group's progress as a community of learners. Not surprisingly, I take notes as I go in a seminar journal I've developed. These notes help me improve class performance, develop benchmarks, and select more effective texts for future seminars. For example, these papers indicate that students are moving past the "seminars equal debate and argument" stage toward quieter and more cooperative dialogue. Further, they show awareness that getting everyone involved is crucial. At the composition level, I also note that they have real problems making verbs agree with pronouns such as 'everyone.' We'll work on that.

Why is the Omnilog Framework successful?

In several ways the Omnilog Framework is simple. It requires no massive technologies. It depends on no particular educational "standards." It requires no major upheaval in the normal classroom day-to-day. It is easy to implement and firmly rooted in the present, teachable moment. It is flexible and not chained to any one philosophy.

Yet it works.

Students are challenged to read deeply, to speak honestly, to judge fairly, and to write clearly. A quieter, more respectful, and more inclusive classroom community of learners is built. This in turn gives the classroom a more human face. As a teacher I get to know students far better than I did previously, and the more relaxed atmosphere allows us to learn and laugh together.

Small wonder then that students enjoy "the

framework." It allows us all to "spread" and "extend" our minds "out." For too long, I expected students' minds to be "contracted and folded up" like Plutarch's Persian rug.

Fortunately for my students and me, several years ago I became fed up with all that was "obscure and lost" through the skill-drill-and-kill regimen. This weariness pushed me to reconsider what education today's students really need. One result has been the Omnilog Framework.

As a part-time seminar trainer for the Indiana Department of Education, I have been able to share this framework with literally dozens of Hoosier teachers. Judging from classroom observations and teachers' e-mails, it seems to work for them as it has worked for me. However, this is hardly surprising. Given the chance to "spread," authentic learning will naturally flourish.

About the Author

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Figure 1.

Seminar _____ **Response**

Name _____

Date _____ **#** _____

1. What was the most positive thing you observed about this seminar?

2. What was the thing you observed that our community most needs to improve?

3. How would you describe this seminar text? Why?

4. Based on this seminar's dynamics, what type of text would you suggest for our next seminar?

5. How would you summarize the facilitator's performance during this seminar? Why?

<jfludy@dmci.net>.

Thanks for your input. Together, we're building a community of learners in this class.

Figure 2.

Community Assessment

Name _____

Date _____ **#** _____

Text title and creator: _____

1. Write a well-organized paragraph comparing this seminar to a previous seminar.

2. Write a well-organized paragraph contrasting this seminar to a previous seminar.

3. Write an order of importance paragraph assessing our community’s performance in this seminar. What are three specific benchmarks we met or failed to meet?

Thanks for your effort. Together, we’re building a community of learners in this class.

Figure 3

Seminar Essay Rubric

Name _____

Date _____ **#** _____

Topic: Write a complete essay assessing our community performance in today's seminar. You may do this in any manner you wish so long as your essay fits the rubric below.

Please attach this rubric sheet to your essay.

I. Introductory Paragraph /3

Was there an attention-getting opener?

Was there a smooth bridge to the thesis?

Was there a clear thesis statement?

II. Body Paragraphs /12

Were there clear and appropriate topic sentences?

Was adequate support given to each topic sentence?

Were transitions used?

Were there interparagraph links?

III. Concluding Paragraph /3

Was there a clear restated thesis?

Was there a summary of the paper's main points?

Was there an attention-getting closer?

IV. Mechanics /7

Was there adequate punctuation?

Was capitalization correct?

Were there complete sentences?

Were there few or no spelling errors?

Comments: