

Finding out about seminars

Interviewer: So, Elwyn, you teach international students here at the university, don't you?

Elwyn: Yes I do - a lot of students from Asia, the Middle East and other countries in Europe.

Interviewer: That must be great. I've heard in the UK that seminars are often used. Is that true?

Elwyn: Ah yes, it is.

Interviewer: And for international students, how do they find that?

Elwyn: They often find it quite difficult because they're not familiar with this method of learning. They're used to the teacher telling them the facts and the teacher doing most of the speaking, so seminars are quite different for them because we expect the students to participate.

Interviewer: So does that affect how much they take part then, in seminars?

Elwyn: Yeah it does, because some students are very worried about making a mistake with their language in front of other people; sometimes they just feel that they can't express complex ideas spontaneously.

Interviewer: Yeah I suppose that's understandable, isn't it?

Elwyn: Yeah, absolutely.

Interviewer: You mentioned about the students not being familiar with this style, so what then could a student coming to the UK expect?

Elwyn: It depends on the subject, but basically a seminar is a place for a discussion. It may be based on an article or focussed on a particular piece of research.

Interviewer: So you'd have to do some preparation then?

Elwyn: It's very important for the students to come prepared to a seminar, yes, because it's not a time when they learn new facts, it's a time for discussing facts.

Interviewer: Okay then. So the students have to do a lot of work, but what about the teacher? What do they do in a seminar?

Elwyn: Well obviously they start off the seminar, but during the seminar they'll be asking leading questions to make everybody participate. They'll listen carefully and guide the discussion, and the teacher will encourage certain students, either because they haven't said anything and they want to know what they're thinking, or perhaps because the student's made an interesting point and the teacher feels that they should develop it.

Interviewer: So in seminars the tutor doesn't just present the information that the students need to learn?

Elwyn: No, that's done at a lecture. The seminar's a place for an exchange of views on a particular topic.

Interviewer: So do the students sometimes find that a bit frustrating?

Elwyn: They can do because, as I've said earlier, they're used to the teacher telling them about a particular topic and a seminar's completely different because it's a very good way of learning how to understand a topic. And you may actually change your point of view during the seminar as a result of the discussion with other students.

Interviewer: Okay then. And what skills does a students need to take part in a seminar?

Elwyn: First of all they need the confidence and willingness to speak out - to give opinions, to ask other students questions and move the discussion forward. And also they've got be able to listen carefully to the other students, consider their views and react to them; not just wait for the teacher to say something.

Interviewer: Ok Elwyn. Thanks very much. That was really interesting.