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OPINION | COMMENTARY

## *The Seminar Course Can Save Civility*

When well run, it combines free speech with a safe space.

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By Paula Marantz Cohen

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A Harkness Table seminar at St. Paul Academy, in St. Paul, Minn., Jan. 5, 2004. PHOTO: STAR TRIBUNE VIA GETTY IMAGES

The only college courses I remember taking happened around a seminar table. I became an intellectual at those tables by talking about ideas in an intimate, authentic way. Now, I teach seminar courses, and when I walk into the classroom for the first time in the term, I am always moved by the faces around the table, by their distinctiveness and

willingness to open their minds to me—and each other.

The seminar format is sometimes called the “Harkness table,” derived from a gift by Edward Harkness to Phillips Exeter Academy in 1930. It is associated with liberal arts schools that pride themselves on small classes and seasoned teachers. And yet the seminar is not a luxury. It is fundamental to the education of resilient, thinking citizens. This is especially true in the era of isolating social media.

To put this in the terms of the present moment: The seminar course combines free speech with a safe space. It reconciles two ideas that have recently come into conflict within academia.

Free speech used to be a sacrosanct, nonpartisan value but has lately been subject to qualification in some left-leaning quarters. The assumption is that certain kinds of speech and even singular words can inflict psychic pain. Establishing a safe space is a physical response to this apparent threat. The theory goes that college students can't learn if they feel vulnerable or experience mental discomfort.

If free speech is now seen by the left as an excuse for hateful and hurtful speech, safe spaces are decried by the right as excuses to shut down disagreement and encourage liberal coddling.

The seminar reconciles these warring values. When well-run, it is both free and safe. In this setting, students feel empowered to speak their minds. A good teacher can discern from the faces around the table the tremor of disagreement or the blossoming of an idea, and can tease out a thought that, no matter how initially incoherent or divergent from a mainstream view, can be clarified and discussed with civility. Once encouraged to say what they think, students tend to remain engaged. They grow more comfortable and more fearless, as well as more willing to change their minds.

My canvassing of former students shows that the courses they remember most are those that happened around a table. They say that these courses taught them to see themselves as people with ideas, as well as interested in and open to the ideas of

others.

We respond to people around a seminar table as we would to those around a dinner table. Experiencing this intellectual intimacy improves our judgment and makes us more humane. A seminar is a safe enough space to allow for free speech and civil disagreement. It models encounters that can spill from the classroom into life.

*Ms. Cohen is a dean and English professor at Drexel University.*

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