

Seminar-style teaching



Team-based practice

Team-based practices are approaches that leverage multiple adults to create deeper and more personalized learning opportunities for students.

Deepen student learning through sustained inquiry, authentic questions and meaningful assessments

Strategy:	Frequency and duration:	Practice adapted from:	Elements of the Next Education Workforce:
A seminar is an immersive learning experience that delves into a high-interest topic, authentic problem, or complex question and culminates in the generation of a novel product for an authentic audience	Teams have the autonomy to determine the duration and frequency of each seminar session. Students engage with one seminar at a time. During seminar sessions, students engage with their seminar daily, typically for an extended period of time.	Adapted from Westwood High School in Mesa, Arizona • Core educator teams: Six teams of 4-5 teachers • Learners: 850 ninth-grade students Inspired by Kettle Moraine School District	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Differentiated roles and responsibilities• Team-enabled deeper learning• Dynamic scheduling

Westwood's seminars are intensive learning experiences based on high-interest topics, authentic problems or complex questions. They are planned collaboratively by educator teams but facilitated by individual educators. Students choose which seminar they wish to engage with and have autonomy and flexibility within that seminar in determining how to demonstrate their learning. Typically students spend two or more periods each day completely immersed in seminar learning. Each seminar culminates in the generation of a novel product for an authentic audience – a task that results in deeper and more contextualized learning rather than rote memorization.

Westwood educators first encountered the seminar approach on a visit to Kettle Moraine School District in summer of 2021. Inspired, they combined what they observed at Kettle Moraine with their existing knowledge of competency-based approaches to create their own unique approach to seminars.

Find out how Westwood prioritizes differentiated roles and responsibilities, team-enabled deeper learning and dynamic scheduling to deliver their vision of seminar learning.

1

Agree on parameters

Determine essential learning shared across seminars. Teams typically agree on key learnings that all seminars will address – for example, shared power standards, vital thinking skills or impact – and/or shared final products.

Example parameters

Common parameter	Example
Shared power standards	Effective research writing
Thinking skills	Innovative problem-solving
Impact	School improvement
Shared final	Community showcase

Decide on the duration of the seminar. Given the goals, student learning, calendar and scheduling constraints, teams determine how many days and/or instructional hours will be dedicated to the seminar. Seminars may last a week, a quarter, or something in between.

Deploy dynamic scheduling. Teams often agree to change their schedule to accommodate the deeper learning and extended inquiry that are hallmarks of seminar teaching. For example, a team of four educators might dedicate seven consecutive instructional days where students report to a single teacher for four hours each day to engage in seminar learning. Teams continue to work together to adjust the schedule as needed to support the seminar to completion.

Seminar types

Types	Learning goal	Authentic performance assessment (outcome)
Interest-based	To explore a topic of personal interest to cultivate passions and/or pursue pathways	Student-dependent
Project-based	To use existing knowledge of a topic to design a product that meets the specifications for a certain task or audience	Product for a client
Problem-based	To identify an authentic problem and conduct research to develop solutions	Solution to a problem
Inquiry-based	To ask questions about a topic and conduct investigations to construct meaning or new understandings	Answer to an essential question



Seminars give me permission to teach everything that I always wanted but was too afraid to or thought wasn't valid."

- Westwood educator team member

2

Identify and select high-interest topics

Brainstorm individually. Begin the process of identifying and selecting high-interest topics by brainstorming independently. This step can be completed asynchronously according to team members' individual availability or during shared team meeting time that is sheltered for this purpose.

Independent brainstorming prompts

Prompt	Context
What are some things that fascinate me?	Topics can be generated from educator interests. For example, a Westwood ELA teacher was passionate about creating art and proposed a seminar that fused ELA with painting.
What might students be interested in exploring?	Consider conducting surveys or creating learner profiles to uncover potential seminar topics.
Based on our curriculum, what concepts must be addressed in the coming weeks/months?	Identify required concepts and then generate an aligned, complex question promoting inquiry. For example, at Westwood, a math teacher approached teaching students about conic sections by generating the following question: "How does the dynamic interplay of conic sections, as revealed through the shadows cast by the Sun on Earth and the celestial paths traced by stars at night, unlock the secrets of our cosmic relationship and influence the mathematical tapestry of our daily lives?"
What local needs or challenges might we explore?	Consider the needs of local organizations and businesses. For example, Mesa Public Schools received a grant to distribute free devices to decrease the generational digital literacy divide; however, they lacked the educational materials to support families in using the devices. Westwood's AgSci team engaged in a seminar that responded to this challenge by developing technology tutorials.



Tip: When it comes to quality ideas, generating more possibilities leads to higher quality and increased creativity. Make sure your team sets aside a big block of time for individual and team idea generation.

Share and build on topics with the team. Share individually brainstormed ideas with the rest of the team. Build on each idea by discussing:

- What else might we consider?
- How might this topic make a positive impact on our community?
- In what ways does this topic connect to our essential standards and skills?
- How might students demonstrate their knowledge with an authentic product to an authentic audience?

Monitor the time to ensure each team member has the opportunity to share and discuss at least one idea with the team.

Select topics. Select the seminar topics each educator will develop. In making selections, seek to maximize the intersections between individual educator passion, student interest, essential learning and potential for authentic assessment.



Tip: Teacher passion + student interest = high engagement. This is where the magic happens and the authentic joy of teaching and learning emerges.

3

Plan the high-level learning sequence

Using the identified high-interest topics, plan the culminating performance assessment students will present and the authentic audience to whom they will present it. Identify the sequence of essential questions and milestones or benchmarks that students will need to navigate to achieve a high-quality final product.

Depending on the planning structures leveraged by the team and individual team members' preferences, planning may be collaborative and occur during shared co-planning time, or it may occur individually with set points for gathering feedback from team members. Regardless of your team's approach, ensure planning and/or feedback time are calendared.



Tip: Use a shared planning template. Many problem-based and inquiry-based templates are freely available. You can create a copy of Westwood's seminar planning template and see example seminar plan excerpts [here](#).¹

4

Design the seminar in detail

Once team members have established performance assessments, authentic audiences, essential questions and key milestones, transition to planning the seminar in greater detail and generating all associated teaching and learning materials (e.g., daily lesson plans, slide decks). Continue to co-plan with or elicit feedback from team members during this final planning stage.

Many Westwood teams use a Provocation, Investigation, Consolidation (PIC) framework to inform their design as an intermediary step between high-level planning and daily lesson plan generation; however, your team should use the problem-based or inquiry-based planning approach you prefer. See Westwood's seminar planning template (linked above) for additional information.



Tip: Plan your seminar as one continuous learning experience. After it's fully planned, chunk it into days. Work with your team to accommodate the flexible time and space to best deliver the learning.

¹ Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College. (2024). Westwood seminars: Planning template and example plan excerpts. Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University.

² Adapted from Murdoch, K. (2015). *The power of inquiry*. Seastar education.

Why educators, students and families love this practice

Westwood educators report that seminars result in higher engagement during class and higher rates of performance assessment submissions compared to traditional units of study. They also reported increased satisfaction: “This experience changed my mind about leaving the profession,” one educator shared, “I fell back in love with teaching.”

Students report that their learning is more meaningful, and they can see connections between what they learn in school and the real world.

Considerations for implementing this practice

- **Leverage your extended team:** Incorporate extended team members, including community educators (e.g., industry experts), into your seminar design. Leveraging extended team members increases the likelihood of meeting student interests and needs.
- **Co-design project-specific norms, expectations and routines with students:** Seminars often require different ways of working and being together. Setting up project-specific seminar norms, expectations and routines will support a smoother process.
- **Prioritize authentic assessment:** Student engagement and product quality increase dramatically when students take on problems impacting their lives and present their solutions to audiences other than their teachers.



[Seminars allowed me] to plan a project that I would never be able to do in a traditional classroom or curriculum.”

- **Westwood educator team member**