

THE ACADEMIC SEMINAR AS AN ARENA OF CONFLICT AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Jens Allwood

1. Introduction

The academic seminar is a communicative and cultural institution of long standing. Today, its ideal purpose is often said to be the promotion of free and critical inquiry, in relation to a selected topic, in an academic scientific setting. Ideally, it should supplement the finding, teaching and learning of facts by providing teachers and students an opportunity to participate in a systematically critical discussion. Etymologically, the term 'seminar' comes from Latin *semen* (seed) and *seminarium* (school of plants). Historically, the seminar has connections with the Platonic academy, its dialogues and the Aristotelian idea of a dialectic discussion (cf. Clark 1989). Together with the lecture, the debate and the disputation, the seminar is one of the favored types of communicative activity in a university setting. Terms related to the word seminar occur in most European languages and since these terms have been used for a long time, they have sometimes taken on a slightly different sense from the one described above. Thus, for example, in Germany the term "seminar" can be used for a university department and in Swedish the term "seminarium" has, besides the meaning given above, also been used to denote training colleges for teachers ("småskoleseminarium") or for priests ("prästmseminarium"). Here, I will, however, be concerned only with a seminar in the sense indicated above.

The main purpose of the paper is to study what types of conflict and conflict handling occur in a seminar. I will, therefore, present typologies of both conflict and conflict handling. These typologies will then be used to classify and discuss types of conflict and conflict handling occurring in one particular instance of a Swedish academic seminar. Swedish academic life more in general has been analyzed in Gerholm and Gerholm (1992). In my analysis, I will try to discuss both normative and descriptive aspects of the academic seminar, trying to contrast ideas about how an academic seminar ideally should be conducted with ideas of how it really is conducted. As a consequence, there is an attempt to bring out the influence of the surrounding culture (Swedish) and the surrounding social institution (university). This, I hope, will facilitate comparison with studies in other cultural settings of both the academic seminar and conflict (cf. Grimshaw 1990) and, thus, contribute to our understanding of how language and culture influence socioepistemic processes.