



Fostering Social Ties

“So what's your seminar group?” “Professor So-and-so's seminar.” This is a common exchange among alumni and students of Hitotsubashi University meeting for the first time. Discovering that one belongs to the same seminar as someone else spontaneously generates feelings of familiarity and trust that transcend any age difference. While many terms traditionally used at Japanese universities are fading into obscurity, the expression *zemiten* (an abbreviation of the German *Seminaristen*), meaning a student who takes a seminar class, is still used widely at Hitotsubashi, where it has been imbued with a distinctive nuance. Today, small, self-directed seminar classes (*zemi* in Japanese) form a part of the educational system at most universities in Japan, but at Hitotsubashi, they have a special meaning found rarely at other institutions. Transcending the bounds of a mere curricular category, Hitotsubashi's seminars have taken root as an inimitable cultural tradition - a symbolic expression of the University's identity.

Some see the seminar class format as reaching a critical point in the current era of change. Others point to problems with the format in such terms as the excessive workload of instructors - namely, the target of improvement initiatives by national universities in the wake of corporatization, the growing tendency for students to prioritize material gain when choosing their seminar groups, and the balance between seminars and lecture-style classes. On the other hand, some argue that this is the very

time that we should be working to uphold the seminar tradition, symbolic as it is of the distinctive Hitotsubashi experience. This diversity of opinions is in itself an expression of the importance of seminars to our university.

Leaving this debate

to continue in a more appropriate forum, we now turn to the task of exploring the seminar tradition at Hitotsubashi. Drawing on material from the *Centennial History of Hitotsubashi University* and other sources, the paragraphs below examine what seminars mean to the University, what impact they have had on educational practices and students here, and why there are so many accounts of past seminars that continue to be handed down in the University today.

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Seminar classes at universities are said to have originated in Germany in the eighteenth century. The classic style of small groups of students working on academic research under the supervision of a professor also began in Germany, where science-based universities placed particularly strong emphasis on a thorough approach to both theory and empirical proof through experimentation. Some have identified the strength of the German system, one that fostered such breakthroughs as the theory of relativity and quantum theory, in the country's universities, and particularly in the seminar-style approach that underpinned them.

It is not known exactly when or how this German-born seminar system made its way to Japan. Nor can we be sure to what extent the spirit of developing something new, expressed in the Latin *semis* (“half of anything”) from which the word “seminar” derives, was propagated here. However, we can say with confidence that Hitotsubashi University was in all probability the first Japanese university to introduce a seminar-like class format, that this format had its origins in the German style of academic endeavor, that many seminar-like gatherings were conducted autonomously by motivated instructors well before the seminar system was established explicitly, and that this style eventually became deeply rooted in the University. Professor Eiichi Sugimoto (1901-1952), known as “the Father of Econometrics” and also the author of many notable works in such fields as economic history and the theory of economic panic, had the follow-



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ing to say about seminars:

The first recorded seminar class was conducted under the regulations for the specialized course (of The Higher Commercial School) established in 1897. This is referred to in *A Brief History of Commerce Education in Japan* as “students receiving guidance on research and producing a graduation thesis under the direction of a specific instructor in their field of specialization.” ...The model for this system was the German seminar system. In historical terms, this occurred a little earlier than the first application of the seminar system in the United States, at Johns Hopkins University. It goes without saying that no other institution in Japan offered seminars at the time. It is with good reason that the Hitotsubashi style of seminars, in its mature form, has long been the model for seminar systems conducted at universities across Japan today.

The Higher Commercial School was the title of Hitotsubashi University's predecessor, Tokyo University of Commerce, before it was granted official university status. Among the many higher commercial schools in existence at the time, this school was special in that it provided a six-year curriculum, consisting of a one-year preparatory course and a three-year main course, followed by a two-year specialized course. Those completing the latter were awarded the degree of Bachelor of Commerce. The specialized course was divided into several streams, such as banking, trade, and consular affairs, with what were effectively seminars offered in each department. In practice, students would move freely between two or three different classes, going, for instance, to Professor A's class to learn about the history of East-West relations, and then Professor B's class to

study finance policy. Professors themselves strongly encouraged this practice. The liberalist traditions of lowering barriers between different disciplines, and fostering a free and lively academic culture whereby students broaden their perspectives and understanding through academic inquiry, were clearly being fostered even at this early stage. Sugimoto writes:

At their inception, these classes, even if formally known as “seminars”, were clearly a far cry from the well-developed seminar model employed today. The actual

prototype for today's seminars may have instead been in methods used by groups such as the Sendagaya Reading Circle.

The Sendagaya Reading Circle was organized by Professor Tokuzo Fukuda (1874-1930), who was a trailblazer in the field of economics in Japan and a pioneer of capitalist state welfare theory. Fukuda was among the first

batch of graduates from the specialized course. He took up a teaching position at his alma mater immediately after graduation, then went on to further study in Germany from 1898 to 1901. He resumed teaching upon his return to Japan, but was suspended from duty in August 1904 after quarreling with the head of the School. He began teaching instead at the Keio Gijuku, the forerunner of Keio University, from October 1905, where he remained until March 1918. Finally, he returned to his alma mater as a professor in May 1919. During this long hiatus, students and alumni from both Hitotsubashi and Keio Gijuku, inspired only by their personal passions for knowledge, gathered around Fukuda to organize a “private seminar” that became known as the Sendagaya Reading Circle. The text for this seminar was Adam



Professors' own homes provided the venues for the early seminar classes. (Professor Sugimoto's seminar)



Seminar Tradition

Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. Every Saturday afternoon the group would gather at Fukuda's home in Sendagaya and take turns in reading Smith's work.

The list of attendees at this seminar included Inosuke Onishi, Umataro Kurumatani, Masayoshi Tasaki, Akira Naito, Keizo Uchida, Kaho Nakatani, Masutaro Kobayashi, Yasushi Yonezawa, and Kaname Matsuura from Tokyo Higher Commercial School, as well as Kinzo Sambe, Seiichiro Takahashi, and Shinzo Koizumi from Keio. Although this was an era in which original foreign texts were an expensive proposition, Fukuda provided both his private time and a venue for those young people

would bring students together and guide their research activities in an informal, intimate setting - a format to which students responded well. As the overall number of university entrants at the time was small, students tended to be aware of their elite status and proud of their potential to lead Japan into a new age. They studied extremely hard and never hesitated to express their own opinions.

Professor Chuzo Hagiwara, who graduated in 1927, recalls:

We took the in-house academy brought to Hitotsubashi by Professor Fukuda and sought to add a distinctive

Hitotsubashi feel to it. We wanted to make people sit up and take notice of this as the most important characteristic of Japan's first-ever single-discipline university. We especially wanted that university in Hongo [the University of Tokyo] to take notice. So we eagerly engaged in seminar and inter-seminar activities.



Students would consult the research guidance (seminar) board to check the schedule for their seminars (1950).

The product of seminars: theses. The University Library holds theses produced by all the University's graduates.

who were genuinely dedicated to the pursuit of learning. One gains a sense of the deep, robust bonds that grew between such eager students and a teacher earnestly seeking to prove worthy of them. The view that the Sendagaya Reading Circle was the effective precursor of the Hitotsubashi seminar tradition is informed by recognition of the strong personal bonds cultivated within the group.

“Reading circles” operated by professors such as Shinshichi Miura and Kiichiro Soda are also said to have been active around the same time.

It was in 1920 that the system of seminars was formally established. The *Tokyo University of Commerce Regulations* enacted by means of an Imperial Ordinance in March of that year listed the names of specialist courses taught by each professor, each followed clearly by the words “research guidance”. In effect, this term “research guidance” referred to seminars. After the Second World War, the terminology was changed to *enshu* (tutorials), a term often used today to denote seminar-style classes.

This period between the early 1900s and the beginning of the Second World War represents the first golden age of seminars. Professors at the forefront of their fields

“Inter-seminars”, gatherings of students with different seminar affiliations, were popular in the period just before the onset of Japan's dark wartime era. Activities were not confined to a single campus. Both seminars and inter-seminars were free to follow whatever format their constituents chose. Some were held in classrooms, others in faculty offices, and others at instructors' private residences. Some involved presentations; others, mainly debates and discussions. Hitotsubashi University's seminars were distinguished by the fact that each one developed characteristics in accordance with its own makeup and traditions.

According to Professor Hagiwara:

We would take turns going there (the place where the instructor was immersed in his own research activities) and staying for about one week at a time. Each one of us would be reading a different text, but we would all have our turn reporting our thoughts to the instructor. He would always respond by attacking what we had said and accusing us of simply borrowing parrot-fashion from other scholars. As the debate heated up, we would start to speak our minds to the instructor, leaving all thoughts of seniority and rank behind us.

In a similar vein, Professor Yoich Itagaki, who graduat-

ed in 1932, recalls:

The conventional boundaries between teacher and student dissolved when it came to academic debate. We deliberately sought to transcend such boundaries as we sought to expose higher truths.

Another feature of the seminars held in this era was the considerable importance accorded to *Grundriß* (basic schemes or plans). Instructors in all seminars taught fundamental principles, using key works that had stood the test of time and seeking to impart the spirit of academic inquiry through close reading of original texts. There was a common appreciation of the fact that practical application of theory could only be effective if founded on basic principles.

Perhaps even more significant was the fostering of social ties. Professor Sugimoto explains this as follows: It wasn't simply academic inquiry in a narrow sense. We would share our outlooks on the world, and even on love. Sometimes we would spend the day outdoors on a picnic; at other times we would go on overnight trips to the mountains or the sea. In this way, the seminar was an academic training ground in the broadest sense. More than that, it was a space where student life as a whole was lived out. You could even call it a community composed of all the *Seminaristen*, including the instructor.

The inter-seminar system began to fade from around 1940-1941, and the merits and demerits of being attached to a single instructor began to emerge. Professor Shiro Masuda, who graduated in 1932, recalls:

As long as our instructors loved Hitotsubashi and sought to develop its academic profile, the University's history, origins, and features could be passed on to students without them even being aware of it...We learned much about the spirit of the University, much that we could not learn in the classroom.

Students would find themselves influenced by their instructors' style of prose and handwriting, and even their smoking habits. Some would even grow into replicas of their instructors in terms of outlooks and ways of thinking.

Sugimoto points out:

This is where seminars can become dangerous. The danger is that a boss/underling relationship will develop between instructor and student. This is when people begin to identify a quasi-feudal characteristic in seminars, and then the reform campaigns begin. In the late 1920s and 30s, the notion was voiced that seminars should be abolished entirely.

This abolitionist idea was never put into practice. One

reason appears to be that the merits of the seminar system, which far outweighed the demerits, were once again brought to light in the course of the debate. The basis for this rekindling of awareness surely lay in the universal recognition of the seminar traditions passed down from The Higher Commercial School era and the many successes they had spawned. Proposals for reforming seminars along such lines as the "inter-seminars" mentioned earlier also emerged, leading to the birth of the "special issues seminar" in 1937. These were ad-hoc inter-seminar style gatherings in which students from many different regular seminars would come together for a limited period under the direction of a specific professor to address significant and specialized issues such as economic fluctuations or agricultural problems. It is said that the roots of the seminars held at the Institute of Economic Research today lie in these gatherings.

References:

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