Seminar chairing policy suggestions

The seminar room can be a hostile environment, and is often perceived to be highly judgmental. In such an environment, those who lack confidence are staff/senior colleagues' opinion of their philosophical ability and therefore their chances of securing a good reference, temporary position, etc. Or they may simply fear public humiliation. Moreover, given that hostile and aggressive behaviour is stereotypically male, such an atmosphere may engender stereotype threat or a general feeling of not fitting in amongst some women (and indeed some men); see Antony 2009, 238-40, and Beebee 2013, §2. Standard rules for conducting seminars often serve to reinforce existing hierarchies, with the same few high status individuals monopolising discussion. This makes it harder for the more marginalised members of the profession to advance, and it also means that fewer perspectives get discussed.

Some suggestions for minor changes that can be made to the running of seminars follow. These could, of course, be adopted *de facto*, without the adoption of an official departmental policy; however, adoption of an official policy may increase the likelihood of seminar chairs taking a more proactive approach, since such an approach will have been sanctioned by the department and known to be so by those in the room.

These suggestions are intended to apply to staff/research/PGR seminar, but they may have some applicability to an undergraduate/PGT settings as well.

1. Take a short (e.g. 3-5 minute) break between the talk and the questions

This allows those who aren't confident about their question (e.g. postgraduates) to think it through and/or discuss with colleagues. The introduction of a break has been reported to have greatly increased PhD students' participation in the question session at Sheffield.

2. Don't necessarily operate on a first-come-first-served basis

Consider allowing the chair to exercise discretion in the order in which they call on people to ask questions, e.g. by prioritising people who don't normally speak/

postgraduates. (First-come-first-served prioritises the most confident, who will often be the same people in every session. Indeed, in many departments the slightest hesitation in raising one's hand will mean no chance to speak.) Also, when writing down a list at the start of the question period, try starting at the back of the room rather than the front.

3. Adopt (and enforce) the hand/finger distinction

A hand represents a new question, and a finger represents a follow-up question or request for clarification that is highly relevant to the question/answer just given. This gives people who tend not to speak the opportunity to ask smaller, 'safer' questions. However, the distinction is open to abuse, and the chair should feel comfortable with noting such abuse and acting accordingly (e.g. by stopping the 'finger' question if it is clearly irrelevant and recategorising it as a 'hand' question, to go on the bottom of the list of questions.

4. One question per question (or similar)

Sometimes a 'question' will consist of several distinct questions. This often results in one or two high-status (or simply more talkative) individuals monopolising the discussion. The result of this is that fewer voices are heard and existing hierarchies are reinforced. It also makes life difficult for the speaker, who has to keep track of them. Questioners should be told to select one question only to ask, and that they can be added onto the bottom of the queue for future questions.

5. Don't necessarily grant the questioner a follow-up question

Sometimes a questioner just doesn't know when to let it lie. You might adopt a 'no follow-ups' rule as an extension of the 'one question per question' rule, or – more modestly – make it clear that permission (which may or may not be granted) must be sought from the chair to ask a follow-up question, and that failure to do this may result in the questioner being cut off mid-flow.

Bibliography

Antony, L. 2009. 'Different voices or perfect storm: why are there so few women in philosophy?', *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 43: 227-55.

Beebee, H. 2013. 'Women and deviance in philosophy', in K. Hutchison & F. Jenkins (eds), *Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?* Oxford: OUP.