

Description

The following report was written by a first year student on the 'Learning History' course at the University of Nottingham

Preparation

Myself and two others were assigned the task of running a seminar for one hour, in which time we had to present information in a variety of ways in order to keep our fellow students interested and inspire discussion. The topic was "Penal Reform in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries". As the first group in the seminar to deliver a presentation we decided to meet two weeks before the set date. After allowing two days for background reading we met up again in the library in order that we might try to break the subject down into suitable sections. As it was a large and much discussed topic we wanted to try to break it down into three main areas, so that each of us might deal with one specific part of the reform. It took some deliberation to decide to separate it into the following areas:

1. The Old Regime - abuses and problems
2. The New Thinkers - The Enlightenment and ideas
3. Consequences and Results

I had selected the third of the three topics. We split up once more so that each one of us could work independently. A week before the seminar, we began to discuss any problems we had encountered and debated the possibility of changing the format. It seemed that we were all happy with the original plan and so we attempted to develop some novel approaches to the delivery side of the presentation. Each of us had prepared a piece to talk about and then we needed to find ways to break up the set talks so that the rest of the group could discuss our ideas. Prior to the first section of the topic I had the idea of asking the group to brainstorm on the subject, just to see how much they knew. Another member of the group suggested that we put up a list of crimes and ask the rest of the class to give an appropriate punishment.

Two days before the seminar we met up for the last time so that we could collectivise our bibliography and smooth over any other last minute problems.

Structure

In order to prevent the seminar from becoming too lecture based, we separated each talk with a time of discussion:

1. Brainstorm on "The Old Regime"
2. Talk on "The Old Regime"
3. List of crimes to assign punishments under "The Old Regime"
4. Talk on "The New Thinkers"
5. List of crimes and their possible punishments according to "The New Thinkers"
6. Talk on the consequences of penal reform
7. Discussion

Delivery

The delivery went reasonably well and I found that I was short of time in my talk rather than trying to stretch it out, which we had all feared. It was difficult to inspire the rest of the group to talk, particularly as we were the first to take a seminar, so no-one really knew what was expected of them. The most successful section was that of discussing the crimes and punishments which people took a genuine interest in. I felt that my talk was a little too long especially as it was the last one. At the end we were complimented for our use of different methods and criticised for curtailing the discussion which may have got under way. I felt that it had been more of a learning experience than a perfect seminar and I now know where our strengths and weaknesses were.

Strengths and Weaknesses (Improvements)

Firstly, as far as the preparation was concerned I think that we were right to break the subject down into manageable portions. However I also think that it would have been more beneficial if we had been able to meet up more regularly so that we could constantly discuss our reading. I found at the end of the seminar when I came to write the essay I had to do a lot more research because it happened to be discussing one of the other two sections. This was not actually possible, as one of the members of the group was a mature student living quite a distance from the University. Use of the overhead projector and of the whiteboard did help to hold the group's interest, so I will be using different methods of presentation in future also. I believe our biggest weakness was in the structuring of our seminar. The problem was that we were so concerned with making sure we finished the planned sections that we did not allow the group to talk freely and develop their ideas. In order to improve we should have been less rigid but more ready and willing to adapt accordingly.

When I looked at my potential personal improvements I realised that I must not waffle. I chose not to read my section but rather to note my main points and talk about them. Although I still maintain that this is the best way to do a presentation, in future I will be careful not to explain the same piece twice in different way but instead think about what I say and use one concise methods of explanation.