The academic seminar as emotional community

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This article will discuss historical ideas about the modern academic research seminar. My perspective will be that of the history of emotions. The study is introduced by an extensive account of the emergence of the seminar at German universities in the mid-1700s. I will discuss the actual seminars established, beginning with the first, in Göttingen by philologist Gottlob Heyne, going on to that of his student Friedrich August Wolf in Halle, and ending with the foundation of the Berlin University with Wilhelm von Humboldt as executor. In all these contexts, new ideas concerning the seminar were important. In the next step, I will use historian Barbara Rosenwein’s concept of emotional communities to analyse one of the most central documents relating to the initial conception of the modern seminar, namely Friedrich Schleiermacher’s 1808 *Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten im deutschen Sinn*. I give a detailed account of Schleiermacher’s argument while showing how the text envisions a new community in which emotions play an all-important role as an integrating force. I also show how the ideas expressed in *Gelegentliche Gedanken* are part both of a general pattern of emotional history and of a specific development, often described as an affective turn, that emerged during the late 1700s. In that process, the feeling of love was particularly important, and my discussion will show that Schleiermacher’s text is a part of the affective turn in this respect.

Keywords: academic seminar; history of universities; history of emotions; Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher; Christian Gottlob Heyne; Friedrich August Wolf; Wilhelm von Humboldt; German universities; emotional communities

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There has been intense debate on the development of the university during the last few decades. The international literature is next to unmanageable, and even in Sweden, the number of articles is large and constantly growing. At the same time, the discussion often lacks a historical exposition of the events and problems examined. In many cases, opinions are exchanged about the objectives of academic research and teaching without reference to any historical context. In other cases there is at least an explicit reluctance to turn to the past as a source of perspective and reflection. This is, indeed, the case in many parts of the Western world (cf. Rohstock, 2011).

Research in the history of the university has often consisted of overviews and summaries (cf. the discussion in Östling, 2016). Although this trend has been subsiding during the last few decades (Paletchek, 2011), many published works still take the form of chronicles with little attention to critical and analytical perspectives. Some of these are even explicitly intended as monuments. Such accounts are indubitably valuable. They play an important role in forming academic identity and in synthesising facts. But the dominance of this type of scholarship has made it necessary to find innovative, not yet fully tested, approaches to the history of the university. There is, not least, space for more studies that go beyond the standard political, scientific and organisational perspectives that have heretofore dominated historical research on academic life.

This study will contribute to such innovative approaches. Its main focus is on ideas concerning the university’s pedagogical practices, and, to be precise, it puts the academic seminar in a historical perspective. There is relatively little written on this theme. This important aspect of modern university life receives, for instance, only marginal mention in that extensive reference work, *A history of the university in Europe* (De Ridder-Symoens, 1996; Rüegg, 2004a). Nonetheless seminars of various sorts have long been central to many academic environments. Furthermore, attention has lately been paid to forms of oral communication, as a consequence of the mid-1990s breakthrough of digital technology (Karlsohn, 2014). An important reason for this attention is the new role assumed by long-distance students in today’s virtual university (cf. Karlsohn, 2012). In short, there are many different and good reasons to illuminate the intellectual history of the academic seminar.

One possible objection to my approach might be that I should focus on the concrete reality of the seminar, rather
than on abstract ideas concerning its nature and meaning. I ought to instead deal with the practices (this argument would run) that actually existed than dedicate myself to the more of less insubstantial philosophies and manifestos. But this sort of critique is often based on the assumption that ideas are entirely separate from any professed reality, indeed, that ideas could have no really significant function in relation to reality. Where the university is concerned, however, it is easy to show the fallacy of this argument. It is evident that ideas, conceptualisations, ideals and norms have had great importance in its historical development. This becomes especially clear in a survey of the intellectual history of the seminar and a close study of the emotional powers infused in its idea.

The latter part of this study ties into the expanding and multifaceted research field termed history of emotions (Plamper, 2015). In this field, the term emotional community is sometimes employed as a means for understanding the socially integrating emotional forces that can be set in motion within various kinds of institutions (Rosenwein, 2002, 2006, 2010). In my investigation, I will use the term to illuminate changing ideas about university seminar practice. The fact that the academic seminar is an event during which various kinds of feelings play an important (if rarely articulated) part has also been mentioned by several commentators (e.g. Ehn & Lofgren, 2007). Hence, there are good reasons to examine the intellectual history of the seminar from the perspective of the history of emotions. Besides, the emotion-historical perspective can enrich the university debate of our time. In both German and Anglo-Saxon contexts, it has been claimed that higher education has suffered fundamentally from a loss of emotional charge. Universities have, these critics claim, been transformed into places of perfunctory activities empty of feeling and desire (see the otherwise very different contributions by Bell & Sinclair, 2014; Hörisch, 2006; Reno, 2010). The validity and relevance of such arguments depends, of course, very much on our understanding of the importance played by feelings in the past.

Given these points of departure, I have chosen to study the formation of ideas during the establishment of the research seminar (in the modern sense). The seminar was a central part of the transformation of the university that took place in German-speaking countries in the second half of the 18th century – a transformation that later came to be symbolised above all by Berlin’s new seat of learning, opened in October 1810. This development was charac-

erised by a change in the way one related to the university emotionally. A new sensibility with roots in the 18th century’s general cult of emotions (a focal point of much research) was gaining ground in higher education (concerning the general cultural pattern, see e.g. Giddens, 1992; Luhmann, 1994). However, prior research has ignored the historical impact of this development on the university.

Before going further, I should clarify the term seminar. The word comes from the Latin, and means plant nursery or seed bed. At an early point, the term was used to refer to various forms of education in which student participation was considered essential, such as in pedagogical training. Eventually, the regular research seminar, whose main purpose was to seek new knowledge, was established. I will be using the term seminar in this latter sense. As we shall see, this type of seminar can be integrated into the university in different ways, surrounded by varieties of concrete physical structures (e.g. buildings and libraries). It is also closely related to other academic practices such as colloquiums, so-called conversatories and group work.

In the type of seminar I discuss, the participants’ individual contributions are always central. The transfer of ideals, attitudes and norms from one generation to another also plays an important role. Historically, the number of participants in a seminar was often limited to around ten. Usually, it took time to become a full member, and one commonly began as an aspirant and was only gradually integrated into seminar activities, assuming, in time, a more prominent role. Participation stretched over two or three university years. Typically, participants met a couple of times a week for intellectual encounters and study under the guidance of the seminar director. Participants often received some monetary compensation for, for example, the purchase of relevant literature.

Below, I begin with a brief discussion about the concept of emotional community. This discussion is intended to set the stage for the analysis in the latter part of the article. Then follows an extensive account of the background and emergence of the modern academic seminar. This context must be sketched in order to elucidate what is new and how it connects to the theme of emotional communities. Thereafter, I present a close reading of a central political university program, Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher’s Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten im deutschen Sinn (‘Occasional thoughts on universities in the German sense’; Schleiermacher, 1956/1808), published in 1808. Gelegentliche Gedanken gives a summary, rare for its time, of what an academic seminar should be, and it also entails many ideas about its emotional aspects. My article concludes with its most central part, an analysis close to the text of Schleiermacher’s vision of the seminar, and in this analysis the concept emotional community is applied throughout.

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1I am well aware of the distinction between feelings and emotions, although I do not draw the distinction in this study. Scholars sometimes distinguish between feelings (and affections), which are defined as pre-language and non-cognitive, and emotions. The latter represent qualified feelings, with an evaluative and cognitive dimension, directed towards an object. In this study, however, the term ‘feeling’ is used to indicate just such qualified feelings. For the complexities of definition in the history of emotion, see the discussion in Plamper (2012, p. 90).
Emotional communities
It has been claimed that the emergence of the research seminar was symptomatic of the university’s final conquest by written culture (Kruse, 2006, p. 332). To some degree, this claim is valid, since the seminar became central to a new and different way of producing text. But the seminar also embodied the return to oral representation which – according to McDowell (2010) among others – marked the cultural life of the late 1700s. This return made its mark in education. The breakthrough of the written word in the German countries, which occurred around the turn of the 19th century (Bödeker, 2005; Wittman, 1991), was accompanied by growing cultural attention to the spoken word. The new prominence of the one medium aroused interest in the others, as well. Thus, ironically, the intimate oral exchange of the seminar helped make old-fashioned written lectures obsolete in the new era of printed texts.

Several researchers have shown that the spoken word has a special relation to human emotional interiority, demonstrating how the function of hearing the word makes possible a particular sort of emotional impregnation. For instance, Walter Ong initiated research that, among other things, has illuminated the role of oral communication as an integrating force in a variety of institutional communities (Ong, 1982). One crucial example is the monastery (also see Graham, 1987). It makes sense, therefore, to investigate the emotional aspects of the academic seminar as a distinctive oral community.

The concept emotional community seems especially useful in uncovering the historical importance of academic emotions. First introduced by medieval researcher Barbara Rosenwein, the concept refers to various forms of social communities – families, congregations, monasteries, guilds and the like – which, to some extent, collectively promote and share both emotional life and the handling of emotions (Rosenwein, 2002, p. 842). Most such communities share a common, concrete life-world. Their members usually maintain personal contact, although there do exist so-called textual communities which are held together, over time and space, by mediating written expressions. The concept of emotional community borders in certain ways to the concept of community of inquiry (compare for instance Pardales & Girod, 2006) and its sibling concept community of practice (Wenger, 1998). But these concepts are more oriented towards and focused on cognitive and practical aspects of learning processes inside and outside educational institutions.

When using the concept emotional community as understood by Rosenwein, a historian attempts to uncover the systems of emotions that mark and demarcate groups and lend them coherence. This entails combing the sources for direct expressions of feelings as well as highlighting more distanced ways of thematising the emotional. The historian may, for instance, show how the sources reveal emotional aspects through metaphors or implicit mood markers. The search will, however, not uncover the feelings actually experienced by historical persons. Rather, the historian identifies representations that contribute to creating, maintaining or dissolving human ties. Such an analysis focuses on inter-subjective phenomena instead of individual expressions such as those founded on personal histories or biographical circumstances.

Rosenwein’s formulation and use of the concept emotional community has been criticized (Plamper, 2015, p. 70f). There is, for instance, the risk of anachronistic interpretations, unless the historian thoroughly understands the contemporary conventions and norms that frame the expressions of emotions in the past. Rosenwein’s perspective also downplays the inner conflicts of individual psyches, including cultural-level repression, prohibitions and super-ego formation. She prefers to concentrate on how emotions function within social systems. She presupposes, further, a boundary between different types of communities that may be less clear in reality than in theory.

One must bear these shortfalls in mind when applying the concept emotional community. But the concept has, nonetheless, obvious advantages when analysing the historical ideas of the academic seminar. It productively illuminates super-individual phenomena and social groups’ boundary-drawing against outsiders, a focus that provides important insights into how this central aspect of the modern university’s operation has been conceived historically.

The origin of the seminar
Before we turn to the discussion of the seminar as emotional community, it is essential to outline the historical background. It is necessary to sketch the institutional setting which gave rise to the specific ideas about emotional bonds and affinity in academic life examined below. The modern academic seminar was, from the outset, a German innovation. It developed for more than a century, assuming its definite form only in the 1830s (Leventhal, 1986). Originally introduced in philology and classics (Grafton, 1983), it was then adopted by other disciplines. One source of the seminar was the college system formed on the English medieval model. It had gone into a decline, particularly in Germany, during the early modern era. At the same time, new kinds of academic community and institutional forms emerged which prepared the ground, organisationally, for the modern seminar (cf. Clark, 2006, p. 143ff). One such form was the private communication of knowledge that took place in the professor’s home. This reflected, to a certain degree, the medieval ideal of close and personal relations between teacher and student, an ideal central to English university practice. This type of teaching came to play a growing role at the new reformed universities such as Halle (established 1694) and Göttingen (1737). Often the authorities were dubious or directly
Antagonistic to this phenomenon, as the locked door of the home impeded their control and oversight.

Apart from teaching in the professor's home, free-standing learned societies and scientific associations also encouraged the establishment of the university seminar (Clark, 2006, p. 150ff; Ziche, 2001, p. 224ff; cf. Erben, 1913b, p. 1335). The more open and free search for knowledge that took place outside of the academy also fostered new ideas about how university activities should be organised. The Catholic introduction of priests' seminars after the Council of Trent in the mid-1500s further encouraged the seminar's development. Here, Jesuit institutions of learning (see O'Malley, 1993, p. 200ff; O'Malley, 2000) played a significant part. About a century later, education in Protestant pedagogy and theology assumed similar seminar-like, intimate teaching forms (on theology and seminars, see e.g. Howard, 2006).

These arrangements and practices should not, however, be seen as the first stages of a teleological process leading inevitably to the contemporary concept and conduct of scientific seminars. They are, rather, genealogical preconditions that coincide at a certain point in time, and thus make innovation possible. This fact is clearly visible in the establishment of the philological seminar in Göttingen, an institution that scholars often characterise as a door-opener for academic modernity. This seminar was initiated as early as 1738, when the seat of learning itself was only recently established. It became well known when, in 1763, Christian Gottlob Heyne assumed the professorship in rhetoric (Nesselrath, 2014; Vöhler, 2002). Generations of academics, gymnasium teachers and civil servants were trained within its confines. Philologist Heyne drilled his apprentices in rhetoric, textual interpretation, eloquence and academic writing. In time, the seminar attained Europe-wide fame, and was visited by many notable persons. One of these was Wilhelm von Humboldt, a linguist and civil servant who – in 1809 to 1810 – created the seat of learning in Berlin which would become a symbol of the modern university. Researchers have certainly disagreed about Heyne's influence on Humboldt, but it is clear that the future university founder was impressed by the seminar environment and its special communal spirit (Menze, 1966).

For many years, the philological seminar remained a local phenomenon. Not until the 1770s were successors established in other German countries. And it was not until the 1810s that one could speak of the academic seminar institution as definitely established (cf. Clark, 2006, p. 159f). In the process, its legal and political-educational aspects assumed greater importance. Heyne’s seminar was, in fact, not an informal arrangement. On the contrary, it was a state-sanctioned and state-financed institution. This institution, in its turn, was integral to attempts to reform higher education by introducing concrete practices which placed as much weight on the use of knowledge as on its possession.

It is equally important that the seminar’s connection to external, state authority allowed it to become a sort of parallel institution within the university in question. Its directors were appointed not by the faculties or other collegial bodies, but directly by the political authorities. This gave the seminar less autonomy than that enjoyed by other parts of the academic system. For many years, for instance, seminar members were chosen by political authorities rather than by seminar directors. This made it difficult for directors to use the new institution to train successors, advance their own careers or gain academic influence.

An innovation takes form

Change came slowly. During the 18th century, there were gradual ideological and organisational transformations that would culminate with the establishment of the modern research university. Many of these changes promoted autonomy in consonance with the era’s newly-formulated commitment to academic autonomy and freedom vis-à-vis the state (cf. Humboldt, 2010/1792, 2010/1809-1810). This process affected the seminar. Directorship, for example, was now given to the professor of the discipline under study. He was granted vastly increased power over seminar activities, including, for example, the right to appoint or exclude participants and to determine the subject to be discussed. The seminar became the sole domain of academies as, in many places, the political authorities relinquished their right to interfere with its organisation and composition. The operation of the seminar now again to some degree resembled that of the medieval college system, though its focus was on creative science rather than on a contemplative life.

In Halle we find an early example of a seminar style that would later become typical – the philological seminar created by Heyne’s student and adversary Friedrich August Wolf in 1787. Halle’s pietistic environment and theological orientation were certainly important preconditions for this seminar (Erben, 1913a, p. 1248ff; Wellmon, 2015, p. 236). But Wolf managed, after some early difficulties, to create something unprecedented: a pure, independent research seminar, concerned exclusively with philological work (cf. Bolter, 1980; Grafton, 1981). There was intense encouragement of a close relation between students and charismatic professor. Wolf abandoned the elements of general education, pedagogy and training that had thitherto characterised the seminar. Instead, he emphasised the value of scientific praxis in its own right. Wolf’s ethos as researcher and his ability to inspire those he mentored were renowned. He was, for a time, one of the most famous academics in the German countries, making the institution he led a landmark of innovative reform within higher education.
Wolf’s seminar was also important in inspiring a new seat of learning in the Prussian capital. Humboldt, the civil servant politically responsible for the new university, had made a passing reference to the Göttingen of his youth during the planning process (Humboldt, 2010/1809, p. 116). Clearly, however, he was most probably thinking of Wolf’s seminar as he organised the new and subsequently renowned university. The Halle seminar even became a model for the entire university’s knowledge production – ‘the pedagogical flagship of the Humboldtian research university’, as one commentator puts it (Kruse, 2006, p. 331).

Humboldt did try to recruit his friend Wolf to help in the work of educational reform in Berlin (see Irmscher, 1899). Wolf had lost his job when his university closed in 1806, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic war. Evidently, the Halle philologist was seen as an attractive academic figure in promoting the new, Romantic educational system. Indeed, Wolf may have seemed a veritable personification of the Humboldtian ideal of scientific inquiry, expressed in the famous saying that university work is best done in solitude and freedom (‘Einsamkeit und Freiheit’, Humboldt, 2010/1809-1810, p. 255). But in spite of his auspicious qualifications, Wolf did not find himself at home in the new context (cf. Mattson, 1990, p. 5ff; Irmscher, 1989, p. 82ff). It fell to another leading figure – Wolf’s student August Boeckh – to direct the philological activities of the Berlin university (Wellmon, 2015, p. 245ff; for an early account, see Köpke, 1860, p. 241f).

Apart from the classics seminar, a number of other seminars were introduced at Berlin’s new seat of learning. The underlying concept, derived from Wolf, spread over time. A decade after its establishment, the Berlin university housed no fewer than 12 seminars (Wellmon, 2015, p. 235). Theologian Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher was central to this development. He officiated, periodically, as dean of the philosophical faculty (and he was later elected university chancellor). As dean, he participated in the establishment of new seminars. Like Wolf, Schleiermacher had worked in Halle before moving to Berlin, and was, hence, well acquainted with the environment created by his Halle colleague (on Schleiermachers academic activities, see Arndt, 2009, 2013).

The fact that Schleiermacher published his principal thoughts was still more important. Wolf had been uninterested in and suspicious of pedagogical theorising (Jacktel, 1989). He had only composed brief and limited works on academic teaching, with short comments on the academic seminar (Wolf, 1835). But Schleiermacher had decided on a much more coherent, detailed and philosophically advanced presentation. Accordingly, in 1808 – in the midst of the political manoeuvring that preceded the opening of the new university – he published a program of university philosophy of great future significance (Schleiermacher, 1956/1808). This was Gelegentliche Gedanken über Universitäten im deutschen Sinn. Although written during his Halle period, the author had the Berlin university in mind. In fact, private and public contributions on the subject of the university had been authored by several of Schleiermacher’s contemporaries (see the contributions in Anrich, 1956). The ideas expressed in Gelegentliche Gedanken, however, became especially important to Wilhelm von Humboldt when planning his new university (see Bruch, 1997). They would – in contrast to, for example, those presented by philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte – achieve concrete realisation in the soon-to-be Alma Mater Berolinensis. These ideas included Schleiermacher’s concept of the academic seminar. In short, Schleiermacher’s reasoning was to ‘set the agenda for all the subsequent seminars in Prussia’ (Kruse, 2006, p. 340). One might say that the Gelegentliche Gedanken was the first work to codify the modern ideas about the seminar.

Schleiermacher on the seminar

Gelegentliche Gedanken is a voluminous text that touches on a number of aspects concerning universities and their operation. It opens with a lengthy discussion of the relation between science and the state. Next, Schleiermacher discusses the links connecting various parts of the educational system and sites of knowledge production (such as schools, universities and academies). The text then focuses on the university and its inner life (Schleiermacher, 1956/1808, p. 262ff). Schleiermacher discusses the university’s central goals and meaning, as well as the individual faculties, their mutual relations and the way in which they were supposed to function. The work is emphatic on the necessity of absolute freedom in the scholar’s inner work. No outside authorities have the right to prescribe such things as teaching material or obligatory attendance. Ideally, a university’s true community would emerge as an unforced association of equals, joined in the search for truth.

Schleiermacher sees the academic seminar as one such free association (p. 264ff). Seminars are, however, special: they almost always exist within institutions established and supported by the state. As a result, the teachers who direct the seminars enjoy special privileges and the students accepted as members receive special support. For this reason, the functioning of the seminar resembles that of the academy. It is primarily relevant in disciplines that study concrete empirical phenomena as opposed to philosophical principles and general ideas. The seminar ‘is related to those disciplines that are, first and foremost, dedicated to the particular, and it takes the form of a relationship between teacher and student in which the latter already appears as productive. At the same time, the teacher does not transfer [knowledge] directly, but rather leads, supports and evaluates the production’ (p. 265).
In other words, in the seminar, the apprentice is scientifically creative in the same manner as the teacher, and the latter’s primary task is to support the student’s work and supervise his results. According to Schleiermacher, however, there is nothing to indicate that this form of teaching is more fruitful than the academic lecture. At a well-functioning seat of learning, there is effective teaching everywhere, available to all – not only to the small, chosen seminar community. ‘Everybody is entitled to receive direct instruction at the university, while the seminar is, by its nature, merely is a specific outgrowth of the whole’ (p. 265).

Schleiermacher also postulates a line of continuity between the lecture and the seminar. They are connected by the Konversationsraum, ‘conversatories’ – the regulated discussion-and-question sessions held in connection with the lecture. This open dialogue allows the teacher to assess the students’ engagement. Conservatories can therefore be seen as a sort of nucleus or prototype of regular seminar praxis. This proto-seminar discussion makes it clear which students have the necessary qualifications – those ‘within whom the spirit of science works in earnest’ (p. 265). During the exchange, the serious knowledge-seekers experience a need to deepen their fellowship and sense of community with the teacher. The teacher, in turn, brings the students closer to himself and increasingly takes on the task of leading their work. For this reason, every professor should have the opportunity to create his own context – indeed, ‘each and everyone must’, writes Schleiermacher, ‘create his own seminar’ (p. 265).

If the state assumes the task of initiating such activities, it hinders the natural emergence of the teacher-student community. The state appoints seminar directors, namely, for life. This means that leadership often ends up in the wrong hands – with a person who, moreover, may keep his position long after he has stopped attracting students. Unsuitable individuals are thus granted a monopoly while others ‘are deprived of the opportunity to perfect the relation to the young and of using this relation in its full scope’ (p. 266). Furthermore, the state distributes resources and rewards in advance, which encourages students before they have achieved anything of value. Thus, Schleiermacher argues, state interference can corrupt the system, and state-initiated seminars have no justification. Rather, the state should allocate funding to the institution as a whole, to be redistributed within and by the institution itself. This would grant teachers who do serious scientific work and who can inspire their adepts the elbow room they need. Only if there is a complete lack of professors freely willing to take on seminar directorship should university leadership and state step in and distribute resources. This situation would be, Schleiermacher writes, ‘regrettable’ (p. 266). As soon as the situation improves, the state monopoly should be again dismantled. This, in summary, is Schleiermacher’s vision of the academic seminar.

The academic seminar as an emotional community

How can one use the history of emotion to further interpret these ideas? What kinds of emotional communities are evident in Schleiermacher’s presentation? Let us start by closely examining the text. The logic behind the Gelebentliche Gedanken’s reasoning on the seminar is developed through descriptions of teaching practices which are, in fact, interconnected. Schleiermacher’s point of departure is the free lecture. This is presented earlier in the text as the reformed university’s most important method of teaching (p. 251ff). Next come the conversatories, where teacher and student meet personally, in an open dialogue rather than one that is implicit and unspoken (as is the case in the lecture). Schleiermacher then advances to the regular seminar, with still-greater nearness between participants.

Each link of the chain assigns central roles to feelings, both implicit and explicit. During the lecture, as Schleiermacher argues earlier in the text, the new student’s desire is aroused: he is touched by the teacher’s aura and awakened from his slumber (p. 252). For this to happen, the teacher must do more than mechanically communicate given knowledge. Instead, he must let his insights develop in front of the students. His presentation must be lively and visual, it must show the professor’s emotional enthusiasm. It must not be reduced to artificial pretence or empty form. Rather, the teacher must engage with and assist the young emotionally (p. 254).

Interestingly, Schleiermacher makes it clear that a successful lecture also demands emotional self-control, sober clarity and balance (p. 253). The teacher must not – to interpret Schleiermacher’s argument – be so overwhelmed by his own enthusiasm that he loses the ability to teach. On the other hand, the joint emotional force that is developed under favourable conditions will go on to penetrate the whole institution. This force constitutes the precondition for a ubiquitous, intimate sense of scientific community. In this sense, Schleiermacher sees the entire university as constituting a community of feelings, defined by and held together by the emotional energy initially actualised in the lecture. ‘If, then, the entire university consists of such scientific communal life, the lectures are still its foremost sanctum’ (p. 251).

After the lecture has ignited the first emotional spark, the student’s engagement is further reinforced through conversatories and other activities in which teacher and student meet and together create a shared, oral, emotion-laden dialogue. A phenomenological shift, so to speak, occurs: the student no longer merely experiences the knowledge that the teacher has made come alive, as reflected by his inner self. Instead he is transformed into
an active participant and contributor. He is incorporated into an exchange in which his relationship to the teacher becomes increasingly intimate and confidential. It might even result in purely private intercourse (p. 254). This attraction, Schleiermacher seems to argue, arises through the teacher’s initial maieutic intervention, but grows – at least ideally – spontaneously and mutually. The significance of the spontaneous becomes clear, not least, through his insistence that the teacher’s choice of adept takes place during a sort of passive reaction to the deepening engagement and scientific seriousness already rooted in specific students’ fruitful minds.

After this mutual attraction has assumed a more solid shape the seminar should be used as a concrete organisational structure that can realise its productive potential within the entirety. This is also the reason why every professor must, in principle, possess the authority to establish his own seminar. After the development of these unforced emotional communities, individual professors must safeguard and nourish its future, healthy development. This can happen when the context is sufficiently small and limited to nourish interpersonal dialogue and, thus, a sense of community and fellowship between individuals.

Each advance up the university’s pedagogical ladder thus entails an increase in emotional intensity. The seminar sits on the ladder’s highest step, and is, hence, the most emotionally laden. This emotional continuity, so evident in Schleiermacher’s text, seems a veritable emblem of the knowledge-seeking fellowship of modern science. And yet Schleiermacher emphasises the lecture as the most important teaching method. Ought he not, according to his own reasoning, have given the seminar that rank? The explanation can be found in the sub-clause referred to above, in which Schleiermacher maintains that all students have a right to fruitful, direct learning – not just the few chosen for seminar participation. This emphasis in the text, in turn, should be understood in terms of the position taken by the author in a particular contemporary debate. In this debate, Schleiermacher, in contrast to other participants, chose to promote legitimacy by emphasising the university’s social engagement, its mediating and educational tasks (see Tenorth, 2012). Despite the emphasis on the lecture, however, the seminar – in its seclusion, dialogicity and exclusiveness – stands out as the principal, emotional, emblematic academic fellowship. It is here that the emotional ties between participants are strongest, and it is here that the new scientific ideal can be fully observed.

Before we again assume a wider perspective, an additional detail must be discussed. In the passages concerning the seminar, Gelegentliche Gedanken presents the state and external authorities as a constant threat. Indeed, the arguments concerning the seminar are informed by a fundamental polarity, placing the state on one side and representatives of the scientific life on the other. As we have seen, Schleiermacher generally describes political and administrative intervention in negative terms. The state should play, at most, an indirect role. Its appointments might, in exceptional cases or by fortunate coincidence, provide the essential emotional heat. On the whole, however, the state is more likely to constitute a barrier to the interpersonal emotional attraction essential to the university community and fellowship. According to Schleiermacher, this is because the state distributes rewards and funding without realising how they corrupt people’s emotional lives, redirecting desire so that it no longer serves science and the work of the community. In short – so one can interpret the text – as soon as the state engages in the university, it harms its free, organically emerging emotional fellowship. The genuine, scientifically fruitful exchange and fellowship derive from being free, beyond the reach of the state.

Schleiermacher’s vision of the ideal seminar is thus permeated with emotions. But which emotions? So far, I have been using terms such as desire, attraction, engagement and fellowship. But the fundamental emotional register of the university in general and the seminar in particular may also be characterised by two terms that recur in several parts of the text, namely ‘pleasure’ (Lust) and ‘love’ (Liebe) (p. 267). These are the two feelings that, in Schleiermacher’s visions of the university, exist and grow between teachers and students engaged in a common search for knowledge. Such feelings help constitute an integrating force that works against indifference, cynicism and utilitarian reasoning.

Concluding remarks: emotional communities in context

If we place Gelegentliche Gedanken in a wider social context, we find many echoes of its coupling of knowledge and emotion. The theme of love for the search for knowledge occurs early in Western intellectual history. The ideals of the philomath (lover of knowledge) and philosopher (lover of wisdom) of the classic era lived on to inspire later thinkers. Spinoza’s concept of the intellectual love of God (amor dei intellectualis) – to just name one of many possible examples – is part of this tradition. Nonetheless, Schleiermacher’s text is best understood as part of a contemporary debate, one which produced a variety of university-policy program proposals. One can see this by looking at a conceptually related example, Friedrich Schiller’s inauguration lecture at Jena in 1798 (about 20 years earlier). Schiller emphasised the emotional engagement and love of studies as all-important, and termed the ideal university community a ‘spiritual fellowship’ (Schiller, 1970, p. 363). Later, Humboldt – to mention one other example – formulated additional thoughts around the theme in his famous proposal for the university in Berlin, in which he had stressed the seminal importance of
enthusiasm and fellowship (Humboldt, 2010/1809-1810, p. 262). Such thoughts were also advanced by many universities’ student collectives, in which (as researchers have pointed out) attitudes were changing (Rüegg, 2004b; Bruch, 1997, 2001). University studies were now increasingly viewed as a serious matter, a task demanding both toil and dedication.

There is, in other words, a long tradition for emphasising the importance of love when seeking knowledge. But more importantly, the era in which Schleiermacher joined his university-policy brothers-in-arms was characterised by a much-discussed ‘sensibilisation’, an ‘affective turn’ (Bell, 2000, passim). This gave feelings, and not least love, a far more prominent cultural role than in the past. Researchers have characterised love as a central ‘cultural subsystem’ during the latter half of the 18th century (Faulstich, 2002, p. 103). The feeling of love was given a prominent role in interpretative frames and as a basis for human action. The experience of divisive modernity that had spread during the late 1700s (Habermas, 1985, p. 59ff) was connected to a weakening of traditional, connective interpersonal ties. Strong emotional ideals and practices were, therefore, given a new role, meant to function as constants in a changing world and as substitutes for institutions such as the church, which had traditionally mediated between people. This is, at least, one explanation why the feeling of love came to constitute a new cultural subsystem.

It is easy to see how Schleiermacher’s conceptualisation of the emotional community of the seminar fits into this broad cultural pattern. In a certain sense, this community assumes the appearance of a congregation, as marked by religiously tinted good-fellowship. Considering the author’s roots in theology, this interpretation is not far-fetched. But Schleiermacher was, at the same time, part of a larger pattern going far beyond individual academic departments. The seminar, as it is presented in Gelegentliche Gedanken, is a means of creating a spontaneous interpersonal fellowship and community. As such, it seems to be deeply affected by the divisive forces of burgeoning modernity. The author’s description of seminar fellowship shows, furthermore, that it is meant to function as a source of boundaries, excluding the surrounding world of political authorities and soulless utility. One could, indeed, claim that Schleiermacher’s vision of the seminar is a form of boundary-work (Gieryn, 1999), achieved by means of emotion.

Schleiermacher’s idea of the seminar as the pure product of feelings and fellowship, has – of course – seldom been fully realised in prosaic academic everyday reality. Indeed, the German university system soon developed into one of the most hierarchical and undialogical, albeit successful, systems in academic history. There were, from the very beginning, forces impeding the creation of interpersonal fellowship and passionate love for knowledge-seeking: on the one hand, more or less legitimate, external demands for social utility, relevance and vocational utility, on the other, competing emotional phenomena within the academic life itself, such as boredom, aggression and envy. Yet Schleiermacher’s dream has been alive since it was formulated, and it has lived on to this day. A good seminar, based in a community of shared emotions – and in which the individual can both become part of the collective and at the same time find his or her own unique way to creative self-realisation – is still a guiding academic utopia.

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