

Calling on students in equitable ways

Even in a student-led seminar, Tim McCarthy calls on students to monitor equitable participation

Featured faculty: Timothy Patrick McCarthy

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Class: HIST-LIT 90L: Stories of Slavery and Freedom (Fall 2016), 16 undergraduate students

TIM MCCARTHY, LECTURER: It's absolutely essential to figure out a way of managing who's speaking when, who's taking turns in any kind of seminar discussion. And one reason for that is you don't want one, or two, or three, or a cohort of voices to kind of dominate the discussion. I, at least initially, will call on people when they raise their hand. So there's a norm that's sort of established early on that usually sustains itself through the term. I usually take the lead in that. In part because I am very intentional about the, about making sure that I call on people in equitable ways. I will sometimes wait if there are three male hands up. I will wait for a woman's hand to go up, and I'll call on her.

[Classroom footage]

MCCARTHY: I also try to do that particularly in a class like this, do that with respect to racial identities, and ethnic identities, and try to not call on a whole bunch of white people all at once, and make sure that people of color and white people are having kind of equitable distribution of, of comments.

TYNAN JACKSON, HARVARD COLLEGE STUDENT: I was very conscious of how many times white students had spoken compared to how many times black students had spoken. I think it is very important that he is the one that is deciding who gets to talk. He gets to call on someone that hasn't talked in a while instead of always having the loudest, most confident person choose when they will speak.

OLIVIA CASTOR, HARVARD COLLEGE STUDENT: The seminar definitely helped me be more attentive to the different speakers in the room, and the different ways in which people step up and then step back. I was more quiet towards the beginning. And it really helped me see, you know, direct with regards to sophomores, juniors, and seniors, who speaks up when.

JEREMY SABATH, HARVARD COLLEGE STUDENT: I had another seminar this semester, in which a similar attempt was made to try and balance perspective, and perspectives, and things like that. And so I, being a person who has a lot to say, and has at the, has in the past, and in other class become agitated when I know that professors and teachers, all the way back to elementary school, would pass over me, it was much easier to deal with in Professor McCarthy's class, because the students are just so good. And it sounds cheesy, but I gained a lot from their perspectives. And so I was happy to yield to them.

MCCARTHY: For a class like this -- where we are talking about issues of equity, and equality, and race, and gender, and difference, and power, and inequality, and all of these things -- there is nothing more important to a classroom dynamic than making sure that there's an equitable contribution, that everybody feels included, that they belong, that they are, that they have the capacity to be brave, that they're going to be respected. When they are all of those things about the dynamics of identity and navigating the dynamics of identity and power that relates to identity is something that I think about all the time.