

## **Keeping the fire burning**

*Tim McCarthy describes the typical pace of his student-led seminar, and why he interjects more near the end of class*

### **Featured faculty: Timothy Patrick McCarthy**

Lecturer on History and Literature, Harvard College; Adjunct Lecturer on Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School of Government; Harvard Graduate School of Education

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

TIM MCCARTHY, LECTURER: Deciding when to intervene in a conversation in a seminar is not a science. It's an art. And sometimes it's a really inelegant art. I like to hold off as much as possible, and let the conversation go, particularly at the beginning of the class, and as the classes are starting to get warmed up. I will take a little bit more of a heavier hand towards the end of class where I feel like we're getting at something, and let's keep getting at that because I think we were really about to have a revelation. And we want, I want to keep us in that place where that's possible.

*[Classroom footage]*

MCCARTHY: I knew that we were short on time, and I didn't want the conversation to get derailed by the awkward silence. And I ac- and I didn't actually think that pessimism and optimism, as the provokers had framed it, was necessarily the way that everybody was seeing these texts. And so I thought that that silence after Bennett spoke, and there was an awkward silence and everybody laughed, my read of that -- and I could be wrong -- but my read of that moment was that half the room was not really either understanding or jiving with what Jeremy had framed as the binary between pessimism and optimism. And so I asked the additional question, not because I thought it was necessarily wrong, but because I thought there might be a way in asking that question to invite more people in at that crucial moment, when we only had five or 10 more minutes in the class. And so that was more about, keep us, keep the fire burning.

JEREMY SABATH, HARVARD COLLEGE STUDENT: I was excited for what he was going to add to our to our provocation, and I thought that when he interjected and, you know, re-provoked, or redirected, or tried to ask us to clarify something, it was always really valuable.

CLAIRE BENOIT, HARVARD COLLEGE STUDENT: I think all of the students in the course really trust that he will intervene in really meaningful ways. We trusted that if it went somewhere off course -- if it went somewhere a little less rigorous -- he would step in to bring it back in.

MCCARTHY: So it was my attempt to kind of wield power but also relinquish it in the same moment. And that was you know again that is not always artfully done.