

BEST PRACTICES FOR GRADUATE SEMINAR DISCUSSION

Inés Valdez, prepared for "Best Practices" series, OSU Political Science Diversity Committee

Graduate seminars are sites where faculty and graduate students get acquainted with each other and where the latter have an opportunity to distinguish themselves in the eyes of the former. As such, collaborative discussion can take the back seat to a competitive effort to craft the best argument, the strongest critique, or the more sophisticated theoretical point. These dynamics operate alongside other patterns of interaction organized around race and gender. Research has shown that men are more likely to speak at meetings and to overstate their expertise, while women and international students may be less likely to do so, or their ideas may be dismissed (even when being substantially similar to those voiced by male peers).

As a consequence, seminar interactions can easily be dominated by a few students who are great at rapid fire critique of scholarly pieces (and their peers' opinions of them) and become environments that produce stress and anxiety for students who are more comfortable with cooperative modes of thinking or realistically afraid of backlash. These dynamics prevent students from thinking creatively and taking risks, and undersell the cooperative, gradual, and error-prone character of scholarly research.

Fortunately, there is a set of best practices that faculty can implement to counter these dynamics, including:

- **Discuss these dynamics explicitly** on the first session, ask students to reflect on their own experiences (they will have a lot to say!) and let them suggest rules of engagement. It may be useful to assign a reading to elicit discussion, like Toril Moi's "Discussion or Aggression? Arrogance and Despair in Graduate School."
- **Encourage students to be self-aware of their own practices** (are they speaking too much? Too little?) and self-correct.
- **Encourage students to follow up on each other's comments** (i.e., not just the faculty member's)
- **Avoid engaging in long back and forth exchanges with one student.** Consider opening the question to the other students before responding, or connecting that student's question to an earlier remark by someone else.
- **Shape the conversation:** Be attentive to students' interventions and remind them of previous or misattributed remarks, and encourage others to do likewise.
- **Make clear that active listening** (including nodding, asking for clarification, following up on a comment, or requesting the group to engage a point that someone made but was ignored) is an **important** part of participation.
- **Consider distributing 2-5 discussion questions** that will guide the session in advance. This allows students who do not think fast on their feet or who are intimidated to prepare in advance for the discussion.
- Consider starting the second half of the seminar (if you give a break) by **inviting those who haven't contributed to speak first.**
- **Set clear expectations.** Using these or other guidelines for inclusivity, be sure to make the expectations clear from the start. This will make it easier for students to remind each other of the rules and will allow you to intervene to shape the conversation in more inclusive directions in organic ways.

Additional Resources

Brescoll, Victoria L. (2011). "Who Takes the Floor and Why: Gender, Power, and Volubility in Organizations," in *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 56(4), 622–641.

Grant, Adam. (2012). "Rocking the Boat but Keeping it Steady: The Role of Emotion Regulation on Employee Voice," In *Academy of Management Journal* Vol. 56, No. 6.

Jerrim, John, Philip Parker, and Dominique Shure. (2019) "Bullshitters. Who Are They and What Do We Know about Their Lives?," in *IZA Institute of Labor Economics Discussion Paper Series* No. 12282.

Moi, Toril (2003) "Discussion or Aggression," in *The Grind*. http://www.torilmoi.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Moi_Discussion_and_aggression_GRINDFall03.pdf

Phildiversity (n/d) "Best Practices for the Inclusive Philosophy Classroom." <https://phildiversity.weebly.com/student-discussion-and-participation.html>

Popova, Maria (2014) "How to Criticize with Kindness." <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/03/28/daniel-dennett-rapoport-rules-criticism/>

Ralina Joseph (n/d) "Succeeding in a Graduate Seminar," (in particular, section "In Class")

Skills you Need (n/d) "Active Listening." <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/active-listening.html>

Sandler, Bernice (n/d) Collection of pieces on chilly climate in the workplace and the classroom: <http://www.bernicessandler.com/id4.htm>

The Sheridan Center (n/d) "Tips of Facilitating Effective Group Discussions." <https://www.brown.edu/sheridan/teaching-learning-resources/teaching-resources/classroom-practices/learning-contexts/discussions/tips>