

Participating Effectively in [Male-Dominated] Discussions

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In my first year of graduate school, I often left my classes feeling frustrated. I wished that I had known the material better, that I had participated more, and that I had made a more positive impression on my professors and my peers. Making valuable and consistent contributions to class discussions was at first a challenge for me, not only because I was still learning how to read, think, and talk like a historian, but because I lacked the confidence that other students seemed to have with the material and with the other people in the room. Not all of my grad school classmates were men, but most of the really vocal ones were, and, as the standouts in class, they shaped the flow of our conversations. Getting a word in edge-wise sometimes proved difficult, but I learned from these experiences and offer here a few pieces of advice for engaging in successful discussions, male-dominated or otherwise.

Be prepared.

Know your stuff, for you certainly will not feel like talking if you do not have command of the issues. Understanding the assigned material and making the best use of it in discussion often requires reading and thinking about more than just what was assigned. Unless your instructors tell you otherwise, read book reviews, and, if you have the time, skim other scholarly works that relate to the ones you are supposed to talk about. Doing so will help you move beyond just what is in a particular book to understanding why it matters and how it fits into the larger historiography.

Also, as you prepare for class, keep in mind other historical issues or big historical questions that have come up in previous discussions and that might be relevant to the reading you are about to discuss. Talking about these questions and their new applicability will demonstrate to your professors and your peers that you can see the bigger picture. In addition, if your professors have not already asked you to do so, create a handful of questions or observations that could help generate discussion, and be sure to use them in class.

Be ready to respond.

Once class has begun, do all that you can to join the discussion. You may spend most of your energy responding to the comments of other students rather than initiating conversation yourself, but doing so demonstrates that you have a strong grasp of the subject and that you can engage on the same level with the dominant members of the class. Plus, being responsive may allow you to ask follow-up questions to both your professors and your classmates that can take discussion to a higher plane or move it in a different direction. Do not be afraid to challenge other members of the class about their comments, but be sure to do so diplomatically. If you are interrupted, don't give up, and be persistent until you get your point across.

Be multi-dimensional.

We all have specific historical areas of interest that we like to talk about, but in graduate seminars, you need to demonstrate that you have broad interests and a varied command of the discipline. Try to avoid asking the same questions in every class meeting. You may personally be wondering, “Where are the Native Americans?” or “Why didn’t this scholar include gender in his/her analysis?” for each book you read, but voicing those criticisms at every turn will only help to marginalize you in class. You may have no interest in reading about and discussing a topic such as the rise of America’s second party system, but you should take that task on with as much – or perhaps even more – energy and determination as you would for a book that was squarely in your comfort zone.

Be involved...beyond the classroom.

As you likely already know, discussions in small seminar-type classes depend significantly on the chemistry of the people in the group. Demonstrating that you are an affable, interesting, and dependable person can only improve your standing with the rest of the class. It may also increase the respect and attention that your more dominant classmates give to you and your thoughts. Class periods are only so long, however, so getting involved in departmental activities – be they guest-speaker events, book clubs, department-sponsored recreational activities, or happy hours – will help you build constructive, professional relationships with your peers and your professors.

Have fun and good luck!

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