

GEOG 696 -- Moderating an article discussion -- C.M. Rodrigue -- Spring 2010

Lucky you. You've just been assigned an article to “moderate” for the seminar. What does that mean?

Everyone will be reading the article. You will read it a lot more closely than they do. Pick out several points (maybe five or ten) that you think everyone should take from the article.

If the article is an original research article (a few won't be), some critical points are easy to assemble:

- identifying the purpose statement (and you might analyze that sentence for its methodological implications, scope, and clarity)
- identifying how the authors justify the importance of the study in terms of the literature and in terms of their epistemology
- identifying all the data used in the study and classifying them as original (primary), archival (secondary), or tertiary (using data published by someone else with who knows which errors)
- identifying how the data were collected
- identifying the methods used to analyze the data
- what the results were
- what the authors state they mean
- how convincing and clear the article is to you

Identifying all this is the basis for what happens in class afterward. Start the discussion in class, perhaps by asking one of these questions. Let people talk and check off each point as they are addressed. As you know, people easily get off topic, sometimes following an interesting tangent or implication that leads off from one of the main points. Keep your attention on that sometimes subtle shift in focus and intervene from time to time to get people back on track. You break into the discussion and just ask people to comment on one of your next points.

Time management is important. No article discussion should go on for more than 45 minutes, depending on how many we have that night. You should start getting nervous after about half an hour, checking to see how many of your points people have touched on and moving discussion faster if they haven't hashed out too many. If everyone has efficiently slammed through everything “too fast,” then what? Then, you start asking other questions about who might find this approach useful for their own interests, allowing the group to start drifting from the article itself to consideration of how they're going to do their own theses.

Something else to pay attention to is the interpersonal dynamics of the discussion. Some people tend to get too wound up or too domineering and you start to see that they may be blocking someone else from saying something. Other people are very quiet, either too shy to cut in themselves ... or too lazy. If you see this dynamic developing, cut in and draw a quiet person into the discussion, perhaps with a specific question to him or her. Try to make sure that everyone says at least one or two things in the course of the discussion of your article.

Now, the evening is over and you survived. Your work isn't over, though. Jot down notes about what was said in class. It will probably include a lot of things you hadn't thought of while reading the article and preparing to moderate its discussion. It is important to get these down as soon as possible after the seminar ends, because your memory of the discussion will start to fade really fast. If possible, write down your impressions before you go to bed. Then, later in the week, write a debriefing paper, which includes your summary of main points AND your summary of the points made in the discussion. Bring 14 copies to class the next week and hand them out to everyone, so they'll have a running record of what went on in the discussion.