February 27, 2015

Dear Rachel,

Thank you again for allowing me to visit your class. I’m sorry that I arrived after your pre-class activity with “The Dress.” When I arrived at class time, the students were already chatty. You collected MT2 and asked about their writing process. They pushed back against you a bit, particularly asking for more sample essays (especially Chelsea). However, they nearly all agreed that they preferred working with film than the essays from Unit 1. Despite their grumbling, you held your own, chastising them when appropriate (as when Adam didn’t have his MT2 stapled).

You assigned the MT3, having them read the various sections aloud. This is a good practice: even though you didn’t have time to work with it much this class, reading through the assignment gave them a preview of what was going coming up next. And now you can be assured they’ve read it!

This was the day students were presenting their storyboards/films in class. To keep the conversation on track, you had questions about the films written on the whiteboard. Since they didn’t follow the criteria of the assignment as you’d hoped, they may also have difficulty narrowing down what constitutes a “scene” in their upcoming microtheme/essay. When you asked them specific questions about their scenes, they weren’t always articulate about their choices. This was a sign that they were still, as Bartholomae would say, approximating a kind of dialogue. As they work their way through Unit 2, this should become more fluent.

As you pointed out, even though they didn’t follow instructions, they did fantastic work on the films. Some highlights from the presentations: The romance film was a bunch of “bros” and they clearly knew their genre. I was so impressed with how the comedy group connected their characters to individual character types from Sponge Bob. But that black and white remake of Hitchcock’s The Birds for the action film? That was spectacular. Close-ups, editing, sound – wonderfully done. Plus, it provided a perfect transition to your next activity.

After they’d presented their films, you asked them to pull quotes from Berger’s article and connect them to the film scene from Psycho. This is a focused use of source as lens, and they used all the resources you’ve clearly provided in previous classes: I could hear the groups reading from the text, looking at their Berger notes, and pointing out specific moments in the scene that were relevant. This work led into a good class discussion, when they spoke back and forth to each other, forwarding each other’s ideas. And you had a magical sense for when students were raising their hands if they were completely behind you.

You asked me to watch for their resistance, and I did sense some pushback occasionally. More than discourtesy to you, though, they were talking over each other occasionally. See what you can do to moderate that, even if it means calling them out occasionally. Also, as we discussed, don’t get talked into accepting additional students over the 23. That’s more work for you, and the student can always find another section of W131.

Overall, you’re doing a great job here. Yes, the students are a bit fussy, but they are learning; they know that you expect from them; and the film presentations were spectacular. I sense that the dynamic that was concerning you may work itself out as you go through Unit 2, but keep asserting your authority and boundaries, as well.

With thanks,
Jennifer