

April 22, 2015
"Elementary Composition"

Observation Report for Rachel McCabe

Hi Rachel,

Below are my notes from your class. Thanks for letting me observe!

As the students were arriving, Rachel showed a YouTube video related to one of their class themes: appearances. Clearly this pre-class video was a teaching strategy that Rachel had employed throughout the semester because the students arrived early to class and seemed content to sit quietly watching the clip. This created a natural thematic through-line from one class to another, and it served as a marked cognitive transition from "outside world" to "class world" that primed the students for the analytical thinking that would drive most that day's work. And Rachel accomplished all of this before class even began!

At the start of class, Rachel quickly took attendance and then led a brief discussion about the video. When she asked the opening question, several hands immediately shot into the air. Rachel deftly navigated the students' eagerness to participate by calling on one student and, at the same time, acknowledging in what order the other students would be able to contribute. I was impressed by the quality of the students' analysis (in a first-year writing course) and their aptitude for tying their analysis back to other authors and portable concepts they had discussed in previous classes.

Next Rachel passed out a previous assignment that she had marked with her feedback. Prior to class, Rachel had expressed to me her desire to have more students visit her in office hours. But rather than 'preach' to her class about the value of attending office hours, Rachel used this typically mundane paper-returning moment to ask the students to raise their hand if they had attended office hours. Then she had one of those students to describe to her peers what she perceived as valuable about office hours.

Rachel introduced the next activity as a specifically crafted response to the informal survey that she gave at the end of the previous class. The survey revealed that the students' greatest concern about their final essay was its "evolving structure." So Rachel drew three big sections on the whiteboard and hand-picked three students to list the kinds of content that might go in the introduction, body, and conclusion of this kind of essay. She encouraged the students to "ask the audience" (their peers) if they were unsure about any of the content. This encouraged lively student-to-student dialogue. Then Rachel led a class discussion about the students' answers that turned into an equally valuable discussion about what kinds of things do *not* belong in each section.

As a bridge activity between the abstract discussion about essay structure and the final task of peer reviewing their introductory paragraphs, Rachel used the doc-cam to display different examples of introductions and conclusions from previous students' final essays. With each example, Rachel asked the students to

explain how and why parts of these introductions and conclusions worked (or didn't work). Again, the students were eager to participate in discussion, and their responses clearly demonstrated that they had adopted the critical vocabulary necessary to address compositional techniques as well as cultural theory (the subject of most of their essays).

During the last fifteen minutes of class, the students peer-reviewed their introductions in groups of four. Rather than working silently and providing hand-written comments, Rachel asked the students to read their introductions aloud to the group; then each group member would provide oral feedback. Not only did this methodology foster provocative discussion among group members, but it also sharpened critical listening skills and put the onus on the author of the paper to actively take notes and engage his/her peers' ideas. Throughout this final activity, Rachel navigated the classroom prodding discussion, answering questions, and occasionally joking with students.

By the end of class, it was clear that Rachel had crafted a learning environment in which collaborative inquiry was the primary mode of instruction. And, remarkably, every student appeared bought in to this system. This says a great deal about how much her students trust her as both a teacher and a leader.

Best,

Collin Bjork