Instructor: Rachel McCabe

Date: 10.20.2014

Observer: Jennifer Warfel Juszkiewicz

Dear Rachel,

Thank you for allowing me to observe your class last week. Below is a summary of what I noticed, much praise, and a few additional thoughts. Please, as always, let me know if you’d like to discuss any of these comments or any general concerns you may have about teaching.

You began the class in a conversational, encouraging way. The students asked if you’d be using photos of your dog in class, which implies that you’ve found a part of your ethos that works to both humanize you and connect with them (pets are great for this). You mentioned that you’d reviewed their mid-semester evaluations briefly but would be giving them more attention in future classes, which is a great way to show that their voices are being heard in the class. You acknowledged their request for more office hours, which is kind, but don’t feel that you need to meet with all of them at the time most convenient to them. Protect your time and encourage them to use WTS – especially at the end of the semester when you’ll have your own seminar/final essays due. (By the way, I find it very difficult to say that I won’t meet with them, so I understand the pressure to do everything you can. But stand firm!)

After the opening chat, you shifted to discussing the MT2 writing process, which seemed more positive for all of them – partially because the texts were more familiar (film), but also because of a profitable discussion you had as a class about which issues in the course could take them into the film. When asked which skills they developed, they were quick to mention the use of cinematic terms and also realized that this assignment was giving them more agency than those in Unit 1. You then worked through a particularly strong sample of one of their MT2s, projected on the overhead with the identifying student information covered.

You then shifted to a discussion of Foucault. Many of them claimed to hate the readings, but they also admitted that the ideas were interesting. You offered sympathy for the difficulty, but made no excuses for assigning it, which shows you’re compassionate but that this is college and reading is supposed to be difficult. You gave a short lecture on Foucault, but they didn’t take any notes, so feel free to push them on this in the future. You then transitioned to a class discussion about the reading based on work you’d asked them to do at home/in your previous class. The students did very well picking out key ideas about the power of observation/the gaze, visibility as a trap, being watched changing one’s actions (the hardest lens to find in Foucault, I’ve heard), and perspective. You noted their ideas on the board, pushing them when they were vague or recasting some ideas into course terms. You’ve fostered a classroom atmosphere in which the students are willing to talk and take risks, they make connections, and they respect you. You praise them without condescension and you have a courteous and generous presence. Evidence of this is that when you smile at them, which you do often, they are paying attention and engaged enough to smile back.
The next part of the class session involved group work. You reminded them of how to do says/does (note that these are listed on the assignment sheet as well, which can be helpful) and asked them each to focus on one part of the designated section. You created a helpful says/does chart on the board and then moved around the class to give them advice and ask how they were doing. There was some confusion at times about what was being asked, so consider writing the instructions for group work on one of the two boards in the room, which may help keep them on track. Once the groups had each written their says/does ideas on the board, you reviewed them as a class. Since you were a bit rushed, there wasn’t as much time to go through each section, which meant that it wasn’t always clear why a particular “does” statement was good. Consider how to make praise specific so the students will know precisely what is good and how they can keep doing it.

You ended class by returning the MT2s. The students were excited by their grades and many read through their comments as well as looking at the letter grade, which shows that they value your advice. You waited after class with a student who had questions, but the next class’ students rushed in. Know that you can tell these incoming students to wait outside till you and/or your final student leaves. You should have the room for the five minutes after a class ends.

One moment in class that expressed your overall ethos was during the students’ group work. You were walking around the room checking on them, and a student asked you how to spell “quarantine.” Rather than just answer this rather lazy question, you smiled but called him on it: “It’s right here! [pointing to the Foucault reading] What do you mean how do you spell ‘quarantine’?” He sheepishly, but not offended, went back to the reading. You were kind but stern, which is a very hard balance to strike.

Again, many thanks for allowing me into your classroom.

Sincerely,

Jennifer

Thanks, Rachel!

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Jennifer