April 3, 2017

Observation Report for Rachel McCabe:
ENG-W170: “The Grotesque in American Culture”

Preface:
Rachel spent more than a year designing this course based on her joint research interests in composition pedagogy and “the grotesque.” At first glance the syllabus may seem ambitious for a first year writing course, even if it is a specialized section that students self-select into. The readings include Bakhtin, Lacan, Zizek, Freud, Kristeva, and others. But a closer look reveals Rachel’s incredible expertise in scaffolding both conceptual material and composition skill sets. These texts do not just contribute conceptual material to their class discussions of the grotesque, they also illustrate the compositional techniques that her students must demonstrate in each unit. Moreover, these texts model the analytical moves that she hopes her students will develop by the end of the course, namely the ability to apply a theoretical framework to contemporary cultural text to better understand an issue. This is a difficult skill for any undergraduate to demonstrate without oversimplifying the conceptual apparatus. But, given the discussions that I witnessed in her class, it seems that her students have both a complex understanding of these thinkers as well as a willingness to challenge those authors’ ideas by putting them in dialogue with contemporary cultural objects.

The Class:
Somehow, Rachel has turned a less-than-ideal classroom space into a rich dialogical learning environment. Her room is cramped and narrow with an awkwardly large table in the middle that—despite its bulky size—cannot seat all eighteen of her students at it. She has minimal chalkboard space when she chooses to use the projector at the same time. And its adjacent to a noisy hallway. And yet, the communal culture and open energy of her classroom was on display even before class began. When I walked in, I overheard one student asking another student about their homework: “What’s your inquiry question for your research paper? I had to re-read the story very slowly to think of a good one.” This intellectual discourse and willingness to vulnerably share nascent ideas with each other before class started is unlike most other undergraduate classes I’ve attended in which most students are plugged into their phones until the professor begins to speak.

Rachel began class by asking students to pass up their research worksheets that helped them organize their ideas about the class texts in support of crafting a strong research question. This was the first time that students had written research questions, so Rachel asked if they had any questions about what the assignment? Though their were no questions, she told them they’d have the opportunity to practice writing another inquiry question in small groups during class today. Then she transitioned into a full class discussion of several episodes from the TV show My Strange Addiction. After writing each the topic for each episode on the board, she asked the class to “rate” them based on how “grotesque” they were. Clearly the students felt comfortable with the various definitions of the “grotesque” that they
had studied during the first two and a half months of the class because six or seven students immediately raised their hands to respond to her question. With each student response, Rachel carefully pointed students back to the class texts by asking things like “So which definition of the grotesque might we refer to when you describe it like that?” Incredibly, the students said—without skipping a beat—“Steig,” “Gayser,” “Freud,” “Bakhtin,” and others. While I don’t pretend to suppose that these students are experts in psychoanalysis, their ability to understand and to recall a couple key concepts from each of these thinkers—and, moreover, to apply those ideas thoughtfully to a contemporary television show—is a mind-blowing achievement in a lower division course.

Then Rachel asked students to describe the structure of these episodes. Again, a half a dozen hands immediately went up. And those who weren’t speaking were listening intently. Most students were actively taking notes with a pen and paper. A lively student discussion ensued in which the students—without needed Rachel’s prompting—identified the episode’s tendency to begin with a “moment of trauma” and then shift into an “anxiety” followed by the “relief of that anxiety” and subsequent “regret.” Then they complicated this traditional psychoanalytic structure by considering the “composition” of these episodes, including the cinematography and music, which, perhaps surprisingly, seem more closely related to reality television.

For the last half of class, Rachel divided the students into five groups of three or four students each. Their task was to use their full class discussion of *My Strange Addition* to generate one research question per group about an episode and to choose three scholars who they might use to compose a response to that question. The groups worked energetically. I didn’t notice a lull in the conversation in any of them. During their discussions, Rachel floated around to each group answering questions and asking students to explain their question and sources. After each group had crafted their question, she invited a representative from each group to write their research question on the chalkboard. In the last few minutes of each class, she read the questions aloud and asked each group to name the three scholars that they would use to respond to that question and why. Again, I was shocked by the students’ ability to say things like, “We’d use Kayser, Freud, and Kristeva because their connection to the ‘sacred’ and the ‘unclean.’” In their ability to re-appropriate these scholars’ concepts to contemporary cultural objects, these students—who are mostly freshman—demonstrated a confidence and a dexterity with these complex ideas that reveals, I believe, Rachel’s strength as a teacher and a scholar in rhetoric and composition: she subtly synthesizes rhetorical analysis and rhetorical production in a way that empowers students to analyze cultural objects and, in response, to compose original ideas about the impact of those phenomena on our lives. In other words, she invites students to co-create a community of writers who actively engage each other and our world.

As a closing note, I’ll add one more thing: I have observed Rachel every year that we’ve taught at IU, and every year she inspires me to re-conceptualize my pedagogy. Her presence in the classroom and in the department is a rising tide that lifts all boats.
Sincerely,
Collin Bjork
Associate Instructor