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FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON U N I V E R S I T Y

University College:
Arts • Sciences • Professional Studies

Class Visit Notes and Reflections

INSTRUCTOR:	███████████
VISIT DATE:	10/26/16

Notes on pre-visit narrative: (refer to instructor comments on attached form)
Context: In your context notes, you mention that students have "completed several low stakes assignments." How do you define "low stakes"? How do you differentiate between low/high— and how do you package this/present it to students? I ask because it sounds like you're referring to process-based writing work (journaling, brainstorming, in-class writing, etc.) that isn't geared toward a final product. If we call this "low stakes" work, then are we privileging final products as "high stakes"? To some extent we can't avoid such distinctions (especially when we weight assignments for grading); however, I think it's worthwhile to have a discussion with students about the various levels of engagement required at different process stages. I would argue (and have with my students) that these kinds of "low stakes" writing can and should be valued more.

Another point: In class you mentioned "analysis" (and in your context notes, "analytical essay") but I wasn't clear how you define analysis. Much like my comments above, I find using this term to be tricky in first-year writing courses because it seems to be an umbrella term without much focus. Much of the nuance plays out across the semester (through assignment preparation, etc.), but I would encourage you to engage students in discussion of what exactly "analysis" means with regard to writing and thinking. (I struggle to do this with my classes as well; we have clear approaches, and we're good at bringing our students in line with our outcomes and objectives; however, we often overlook how we frame things and how/why those frames are established.)

Aim of class: Define claims and evidence. This looks good. One of the challenges of teaching first-year writing is helping students define their claims through their own management of evidence. I get the sense from your notes that you're approaching this through a recursive strategy and I look forward to seeing how this plays out in the classroom.

Outcomes/concerns: Balancing lecture with "active learning" is a perennial challenge. To some extent, it's one imposed on us from "those" people in education who tout active learning strategies as the best way to engage/teach students. While I don't disagree (I've seen my share of glazed-over eyes), I do think that you're on the right track in thinking about balance. As long as you strive to balance lecturing with other learning activities, then you'll be on track to creating a dynamic learning environment. After I've had a chance to observe, I hope I can offer some useful suggestions. Just know that much like writing is a process, teaching is a process. Keep an eye on the outcomes but don't be afraid to be flexible and adapt as needed based on the culture and community of each class.

Observation notes: (sum of my handwritten notes)

Arrived at 9:55; instructor already in room, prepared to begin, talking with a few students
At 9:58 instructor "Hello, good morning" to begin class; sounded a bit nervous. 13 students in room; in the first ten minutes of class two more arrived; last late student at 10:30; total 16.
Classroom distribution: large room; students spread out; as a result, a bit of (negative) distance between instructor/students; big empty space in the middle of the room (eventually filled when students moved desks into small groups); only one student with open laptop (open to course work).
Instructor began class by asking about homework (worksheet) and outlining goals for the class; clear delivery. Nice layout of plan for class.
@10min: Students provided with another worksheet; asked to complete top portion (guiding questions) before working in small groups. While students worked quietly, instructor moved about the room as if to police engagement.
@10:15: Students set to work in small groups; provide feedback on homework observations (worksheets; most students have completed their homework). Instructor determined groups by numbering off. Four groups. Most groups seem engaged with the assignment, with completing their tasks. Roughly thirty minutes allotted for this group work.
@10:45: Back to class discussion / lecture; 15mins. Students partially engaged; more vocal students chime in to instructor's questions.
@11:00-11:15: Back to groups = apply lecture/discussion to assignment already discussed in groups (advertisement analysis). (Not much time remaining in class for this task.)
A few comments before dismissing class (a couple "oh I forgot" moments).

The Black Hole in the Middle of the Room: One of the first things I noticed upon the start of class was the big, gaping hole in the middle of the room. Invariably, when students enter a classroom, they sit where they want to. This isn't a big problem in most cases because the size of the room usually matches the size of the class. But this is not always the case, and when it's not the case, it can lead to odd spatial dynamics. In another class I observed, there were at least three empty seats at the front of all rows that were empty; not only was the instructor separated by typical classroom norms, but physically by desk/chairs. An often overlooked aspect of classroom management is this very thing: how does the space, and the organization of this space, constrain and/or afford learning strategies and community engagement.
An easy fix is the circle. The effectiveness of the circle is questionable, surely, but I would encourage you to think about how student distribution in the room can help or impede the effectiveness of your delivery. (Often the main reason given for putting students in a circle is reorienting the hierarchy of teacher/student, as a move to share power, etc. From a practical standpoint, however, I have found that the circle makes it much harder for students to "hide" in a room and that I can better monitor all activity because I can see it.)
Much of this community distribution goes away (as it did in your classroom ten minutes into the class) when you move to group work; however, I do find that taking the time to physically alter your room's internal structure can, in certain ways, help with delivery.
A final point about this is a logistical one: I liked that you moved students into groups, and then brought them back together (more on that in a minute), and then sent them back to their groups. Logistically, however, there was a problem with the middle phase. The way that students were oriented in their groups made it extremely difficult for many of them to focus their attention on you, your brief lecture, and the blackboard. As a result, many students may have missed the finer points of what you were doing. When you do this kind of back and forth, I would encourage you to (again) have students physically reorient to the front of the room so they can see what you're doing, engage better with the class as a whole (instead of as outliers in small clusters).

Switching things up: As I mentioned already, I really liked how you moved between methods—from lecturing to class as whole, to group work, to regrouping, to group work. You did a really nice job of first outlining the goals for the day's class, reiterated previous classwork and

objectives, and then setting them off on their group task. This multi-leveled approach allowed for a really good progression of ideas—a building on the concepts. Here's the concept; apply the concept; regroup to discuss application of the concept; reapply and move forward. Good stuff. More specifically to the assignment: I think it was a really good idea to have the students describe their ads before actually showing them to their classmates. This helped reinforce effective description and audience awareness (how a student talks about their ad before showing it allows for groupmates to see the differences between description and artifact and can then ask questions or assist in better describing; a good strategy I have used to reinforce thesis writing).

Group/Instructor Interaction: This was another great aspect of what you did today. You made a point to visit all of the groups and engage with them in their tasks. Striking a balance between being hands off/hands on is always tricky, but good group work needs to be modelled and monitored if it's going to be effective. (I struggle at times with this aspect in my own teaching because I a) don't want to seem like a correctional officer walking around with a billy-club making sure no one is breaking the rules, and b) I don't want to "taint" the experience by doing the work for them, or not letting them discover/problem-solve on their own. As a result, I tend to be more hands off, but watching you in class reminded me that being more hands on is probably the better way to go more often than not.)

To laptop or not to laptop; tech or no tech: At one point, you asked if they brought their computers. Did you ask them to bring computers before class (in the previous class)? I ask because I have noticed that FDU students don't always bring their computers, or even have computers they can bring. So it's important to plan in advance if you're going to rely on the use of computers in a given class period.

The same goes for instructional technology. Today's lesson was (arguably) "low tech" (and this may have been out of necessity given the space/tech availability), with two hard copy handouts and writing on a chalkboard. However… given the nature of the assignment, it might have been more effective (especially in the lecture portion) if you'd been able to make a turn toward media. This could have been one way to package the physical moving of students back to focus on you. You might have been able to better reinforce the key concepts of the lesson if they were more visible (projected on a screen). Not a necessity, mind you; just a suggestion. (And one that speaks to your noted concerns referenced earlier: When use of multimedia works, it can be a good way to supplement lecture and engage your students' different learning centers. Of course, when it doesn't work, it can create more problems than it solves, so I understand if the "low tech" approach of this class was intentional.

Self-Reflection / Additional Comments: (Visitor self-reflection)
As I mentioned above, I was inspired by your working with groups to be a bit more proactive in my group project monitoring. While I detected a bit of nervousness at the beginning of class (because of my presence? A misread?), you displayed a genuine care and confidence as you worked with the groups, and that level of engagement is exciting to see. So thank you for that.

I also was encouraged by your lesson's plan/structure and how the class built from one thing to the next. I am major proponent of assignment sequencing (of having one assignment prepare for / lead into the next), but I'm not always as intentional with this strategy in how I deliver course concepts. The balance you struck in this class between leading and facilitating was commendable.

In your "Outcomes/concerns" comments, you mentioned wanting to better plan activities and avoid lecturing. I'm not sure that this is the right way to think about it (especially after observing

how you handle switching modes); rather, think about lecturing in terms of discussion. What you did today is a good example. Again: here's the concept; apply the concept; what did you learn from applying the concept. If you follow this recursive strategy there's less need to "hammer" points through one-sided lecturing. Application is key, especially since making student writing the focus of any first-year course allows for student discovery to really guide concept development (instead of simply reading about them in a textbook, or listening to a boring lecture). The other part of my answer here has to do with what I said above about tech: Adding tech to your lectures isn't about embellishing so much as supplementing and supporting (and providing moments for pause, to break up the drone). Especially with this assignment: Advertising is so design/media driven that it would have made perfect sense to bring in things to show—in bright, technicolor wonder and surround sound!

Seriously, though, I'd also suggest that another way this class period could have gone: At the regroup portion, you might have asked a student to volunteer to share his/her ad and look at one example as a whole class. This would have reinforced the ideas being taught, and it would have brought the class back together. And you could have had that student show/project/play his/her ad to break up the otherwise text-heavy focus of the learning.

Overall: I really enjoyed this experience, thought everything went well. Thanks for having me visit!

Class Visit Notes and Reflection

FAIRLEIGH DICKINSON UNIVERSITY

COURSE TITLE: Academic Writing

INSTRUCTOR: _____

DATE: _____

University College:
Arts • Sciences • Professional Studies

To be completed by instructor before class visit and given to visitor prior to class meeting:

CONTEXT: Describe the course you are teaching and the role of this class meeting in the arc of the semester's work.	This course has focused on different aspects of academic writing such as description, narrative, and presenting information. Our current project focuses on analysis. The students have completed several low stakes assignments and are now choosing a topic + gathering observations for an analytical essay.
AIM OF CLASS: Describe your teaching objectives for this particular class session. Describe the primary area of inquiry you are interested in reflecting on through this visit.	My objective for this particular class is to define claims + evidence + make sure the students can make claims based on their observations + present effective evidence to support them. moving from observing to thinking critically about their observations to presenting their ideas with an evidence based argument.
OUTCOMES/CONCERNS: What aspects of the class would you most like feedback on?	I'm still trying to figure out how to balance me presenting information they need with more active learning; how to plan better in class activities and avoid lecturing.

NARRATIVE OF CLASS: Describe what occurred in this class meeting. You may want to note what events went according to plan and what changes or improvisations took place.	In class the students worked in small groups to present their ads + analysis. I think I did a pretty good job meeting + engaging with each group. We brokedown the example essay well together & then I presented the components of arguments and students began to plan their essays.
PLANS FOR FURTHER WORK OR REVISION: What might you do differently? What changes or refinements might you make to your teaching practices?	I would like to be able to explain and present the components of an argument better.

SELF-REFLECTION / ADDITIONAL COMMENTS: What did you learn from this class visit? How might you grow pedagogically from having discussed the teaching materials, the course, and the visit? Do you have any additional comments?	

SIGNATURES   **DATE**

Instructor _____ |_____

Visitor _____ |_____