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Classroom Observation—Dr. Marlen Harrison

I observed Dr. Harrison's FYW102 Writing and Research class on Tuesday, February 26th, 2013. During the class he presented his work on language and sexuality in Japan and facilitated a practice peer review workshop.

Dr. Harrison explained to the students that he was presenting his own work as an example to help them prepare for their own upcoming "Literary Review" presentation. While the research he described was intellectually sophisticated material, Dr. Harrison not only maintained, but engaged the attention of the class throughout the hour-long presentation. I believe he succeeded through several techniques, all of which I found admirable:

1. His persona was personal and intimate, as well as professional and learned. He engaged his students as people and as colleagues. He created the impression that he was both a person explaining a topic about which he cares and a scholar earnestly presenting his worthy ideas, and, as such, they should (and did) both respect the product of his passion and endeavor to understand his research.
2. Without "dumbing down" or attenuating the depth of his research, Dr. Harrison was able to maintain the accessibility of the content by explaining the more sophisticated concepts both in theory and via examples.
3. Dr. Harrison engaged his audience and asked for group participation by posing questions and integrating the responses into the presentation.

At the conclusion of his presentation, Dr. Harrison tied the activity back to the course content by identifying the rhetorical techniques he employed and discussing with the class how these decisions contribute to a successful presentation. By including the presentation, Dr. Harrison conducted the students on an interesting foray into applied linguistics, which is appropriate for a course in composition, and most likely not information that would be found in composition textbooks. He also provided an example of actually scholarly research and the real-world "conversation" in which it obtains relevance, in addition to providing an example to guide the students as they prepare for their own presentations.

Following the presentation, Dr. Harrison facilitated a practice peer review workshop.

In Dr. Harrison's class, all students bring laptops that, on the day I attended, all used throughout the class—first to view PowerPoint slides during the presentation, and then to open and edit the necessary documents during the practice peer review workshop.

My understanding is that Dr. Harrison asks his students to work exclusively online during his course. He requires that each student create a WordPress site on which all written work—from blogs to final drafts—is posted. Additionally, he facilitates peer reviews of drafts in which a pair of students meet with him in private conference to workshop drafts of assignments. These drafts are workshopped using a rubric of the students’ design, under his guidance. In order to accomplish this collaborative workshop/grading, the students practice reviewing a sample work using a sample rubric. This is the activity that I observed.

During group work, all students appeared to be focused on the task at hand and the discussions I overheard were on-topic. Dr. Harrison allowed time for teams to go through the sample essay and complete the sample rubric, after which he went over the rubric and asked the class to come to a consensus regarding the success of the sample essay. This activity allowed the students to correlate their own analyses of student work to a consistent academic standard. Using a sample essay and working in teams allowed the students to develop the integrity and confidence required to give honest feedback to each other, while helping them surmount the anxiety of assessing each other’s work.

As evidenced by both the presentation of his own work and his approach to peer review, this type of real-world learning—both practical and collaborative—appears to typify Dr. Harrison’s approach to teaching composition. His students are remarkably engaged both with him and with the subject matter. He appears to have engendered an atmosphere of casual conviviality and intellectual inquiry that is, in my experience, difficult obtain in a core composition course. Dr. Harrison appears to have effectively created the “community of writers” that often is the key to a successful writing class. I find Dr. Harrison’s approach to teaching composition innovative and I plan to implement two of his techniques during the current semester as I endeavor to serve my students as capably as Dr. Harrison serves his.