

Observation of Teaching

Instructor: Dr. Marlen Harrison

Observer: Dr. Aimee L. Whiteside

Educational Institution: University of Tampa

Course: Writing and Research (FYW 102)

Date: March 28, 2013

I had the great privilege of observing Dr. Marlen Harrison's FYW 102: Writing and Research course at 2:00-3:50 on Thursday, March 28, 2013. Dr. Harrison briefed me about a week before the class session to help me understand the goals of the class session and how it fits within his overall curriculum. The purpose of this class session involved student practice presentations of their research, and the students also developed the evaluation criteria for the presentation.

Overall Learning Environment

As a social presence researcher, I was immediately struck by the high-level of social presence and the mutual care and concern in the room. Before class began, students asked Dr. Harrison how he was doing, and he also checked on a few students as well as followed up with their questions and projects. In my observation notes, I wrote "beautiful rapport with students—very light, happy, and relax atmosphere." In the background, he plays music from the class radio station (RadioParadise.com), which also adds to the productively cheerful environment and overall class culture.

High Expectations and Specific Learning Outcomes

Dr. Harrison holds his students to high expectations. Before class began, he was engaged in a conversation with a student about how he "could improve even more." Dr. Harrison's high expectations also came through within the quality of the research presentations throughout the room. Students confidently introduced themselves to a group of people not familiar with their research, explained their research question, gave a background of topic, why it was important to them, stated their position and the reasons for it. From three different vantage points in the room (I shifted to get different perspectives), all students seemed on task and generally interested in listening to each other and helping each other. The atmosphere seemed more like an upper-division or graduate level course than a required first-year writing course. For example, one student developed an elaborate conference-quality poster board to showcase his research. As I observed, there was only one student who didn't step up to the task. Dr. Harrison pointed out his disappointment, and that student later noted in the full-class reflective time that he didn't "prepare enough" and he needed to put more work in to this presentation before Tuesday's class.

Class Management and Pacing

Dr. Harrison is a master at class management and pacing. Some of it was serendipitous, such as the song stopping right at the 1:59 mark and fading picture-perfectly into Dr. Harrison saying, "Let's Get Started." Other parts were the sheer mastery of an experienced and gifted instructor. He laid out three clear parts to the session: (a) student-generated evaluation criteria, (b) research presentations, and (c) reflections on the process. He began right at 2:00 and ended right at 3:50. The pacing was perfection; nothing felt rushed, and each part flowed beautifully into the next part.

Connection of Teaching Strategies and Philosophy to Overall Learning

Another strength of the session was the way that Dr. Harrison helped students think about the connection of presenting research to their overall research and writing process. He also spent the last thirty minutes on reflection, which is consistent with his teaching philosophy. First, students spent the first few minutes on their own self-reflection, followed by sharing the reflection with their teams. Dr. Harrison asked them to pick a number 1-10 (10 is perfection) describing their work today. Then, brought the whole class together and asked for three volunteers to share their number and their reflection. Next, he asked students to share a positive attribute about their teammates as well as note what surprised them about this overall process. Finally, he ended class with his own overall reflections on how to improve for next week's session. He suggested that students generally need to integrate more personal and emotional connections into their research as well as to harness the opportunity to interact more with their audience. He illustrated each suggestion, often using students' work as examples.

Online Course Materials

Dr. Harrison's online course presence is well-organized and promotes easy access for the students at marlenharrison.com. He provides an overview of the day's overall goals and activities as well as a link to the syllabus and to student resources. It's a model for others.

Critical Thoughts

I find Dr. Harrison to be phenomenal instructor. He's truly a model for other teachers. My only suggestion involves moving the evaluation criteria to the end of the previous course session so that students know in advance the rubric from which they will be evaluated. Although I sensed no apprehension in the room, students can become frustrated when they worked so hard on a piece and didn't know the grading criteria in advance. That said, I thought it was incredibly insightful to facilitate a student-generated evaluative rubric as a formative assessment piece. The students seemed to feel great ownership in the process and paid particular attention to each component (time, engagement, visual quality, organization, citation and referencing, content, breadth of knowledge, clear gap and purpose, consider audience, and presentation skills).

Overall Evaluation

To me, the hallmark of an exceptional teacher means meeting all of the following criteria: possess great content expertise, nurture a caring learning environment, set high expectations with specific learning outcomes, present a well-organized and well-managed classroom, and connect students from the teaching activities to the overall learning goals and outcomes. Dr. Marlen Harrison exceeds in each of these areas. He has taught me a few lessons about the kind of teacher I aspire to become, and he gave me an incredible opportunity to see excellence in action.

"Learn from each other and build ideas. Challenge what's acceptable." –M.E. Harrison