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I observed a meeting of Kevin Cassell's ENG1111 class on March 5, 1999.

Students had been assigned two readings, Malcolm X's December 13, 1964, speech at the Audubon Ballroom in Harlem and a U.S. News & World Report report on his 1965 assassination. They had also been asked to prepare two written responses to the readings: to imagine Malcolm's own likely response to the press coverage of his murder, and to focus on the language of a particular paragraph from the Audubon speech. Those would guide the class conversation and then be collected.

Before the class session proper began, Kevin introduced me and explained my presence, called the roll, discussed some course mechanics (the number and nature of written responses to be included in the course portfolio; the sorts of revisions his "check" system indicates are required; substitutions for missed assignments), and handed out and briefly discussed a flyer on the Middler Year Writing Requirement (he asked for student versions of the requirement, debunked the more mythic ones offered, and so on).

The discussion of the class materials began with a series of questions from the instructor: who is Malcolm X?, the question reiterated in that and other forms until students had presented a fairly well informed portrait. Kevin used the process--often marked by the sorts of follow-up questions that showed he was both listening and knew where he was going--to reinforce such course concerns as an interest in the names, qualities, and contexts of sources, the virtues of specificity and exactitude, and so on. Then he turned to the speech itself. Again he used questions to elicit information which he then shaped and applied to issues in the speech and to matters of composition--a nice exemplification of the intersections of reading and writing. The speech was contextualized--it was something of a riff on Malcolm's characteristic concerns because it was delivered extemporaneously as the audience waited for a Tanzanian speaker who had been delayed; this affected its organization and style, points Kevin smoothly and constructively elicited and applied to student's own writing contexts, audiences, and aims. At the same time, interesting political and "representational" questions were raised: is Malcolm's critique of the "press" legitimate?; how so?; why?; is his critique borne out by the language of the press report of his death you have before you? Throughout Kevin did a fine job of using student answers to questions to generate further, more nuanced questions and, then, additional answers; he also used the entire exchange to emphasize the compositional virtues of defining terms, supporting assertions with analyzed evidence, and so on.

Those "applications" became increasingly specific as the class turned back to Malcolm's speech to discuss the language of paragraphs they had selected. In an instructive sequence, they

discovered and discussed how Malcolm's generalizations about biased press portayals were asserted, then exemplified anecdotally, and then reaffirmed in more general terms once again. The sense of applicability to their own experience, as writers, with assertion, evidence, and analysis as expository principles was palpable. A closing summary tied things together, once more with an eye to application. Papers were collected and returned as the class period ended.

One of the many strengths of the class was Kevin's ability--after seeming to have ignored or elided a student's comment--to return to it at a critical moment and make it pay off pedagogically in a way it earlier could not have. This choreographing of unexpected steps with an eye to the working out of an already sketched-out dance is a mark of effective and lively teaching. Every detail of the class contributed to heightening student awareness of matters of context, evidence, and structure.

I might make one suggestion. In the discussion of Malcolm's emphasis on "global struggle" and the presses' often negative representation of him, it might be useful to consider that such matters were significantly affected by the oppositional structures of the Cold War situation they inhabited. More generally (and perhaps tendentially), in the critique of media, students seemed too easily permitted to leave their own currently comfortable assumptions intact: that runs the risk of repeating the very behavior they see themselves as seeing through.