

Justin Parks

Observation Memo

May 9, 2006

To whom it may concern:

Earlier this semester, I had the pleasure of observing a meeting of Kevin Cassell's English 297 course. As a graduate student who could soon find himself teaching a similar literature survey course, observing the teaching of an experienced instructor like Mr. Cassell was helpful indeed.

Mr. Cassell was very generous with his time, and we had the opportunity to discuss his pedagogical practices both before and after I observed the class. Mr. Cassell was also very generous in sharing his materials with me, and I have already modeled parts of a syllabus of my own on his syllabus for this course.

In our discussion, Mr. Cassell informed me that he had instituted a requirement that students participate in and contribute to an ongoing WebCT discussion as part of the class. Mr. Cassell said that this was a particular effective approach in the case of students who did not like to speak in class and that, overall, responses had been thoughtful and engaged while, in some instances, students' responses were not as thoughtful as he had hoped.

Mr. Cassell used printouts of this WebCT discussion to drive the discussion in his class, having students explain their answers to the questions that had been posed and having others respond to their replies. As responding to his questions in class was optional, I wondered how the students could be made to reply for the sake of the discussion. Mr. Cassell's use of WebCT was quite effective, but I may be inclined to require that each student I called on say at least something in defense of their posting. The only major problem I see with the WebCT postings forming such a large part of the students' grades is that the instructor does little grading of formal writing. Still, though, the ten-page essay at the end of the class goes at least some way in recovering, for the instructor, an opportunity for this level of engagement with the students' work.

Mr. Cassell's lecture style is lively, animated, and refreshingly irreverent, all qualities that are, I feel, important in the classroom. In our English 592 course we've spent some time discussing the best way to set up the room, as well as where the lecturer should stand. Mr. Cassell had the students arrange the desks in a circle and he sat in a desk in the circle, occasionally standing to write on the board. As we have noted in our 592 class, assuming a position among the students is risky, as it can equate to a compromise of the instructor's power, but in Mr. Cassell's case, the decision was effective; the students were engaged and attentive, and most contributed regularly to the discussion.

I found Mr. Cassell's question of "what constitutes literature?" a particularly apt one, and an effective means of generating discussion regarding the blues lyrics and graffiti pieces that constituted his texts. In keeping with a general opening of the canon and a

broadening of the definition of “text,” this is an especially appropriate discussion to have in the classroom.

Overall, engaging, effective, and—dare one say it?—entertaining lecturer, using the students’ insights to form the basis of his own observations. His students were very much engaged with the course material and he had few problems in eliciting responses from them. His is a high-energy class that also presents its content particularly effectively. Mr. Cassell’s teaching will serve as an effective model as I consider my own pedagogical strategies.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Justin Parks". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Justin Parks