



Dear Steve Wilcox:

Thanks so much for allowing me to observe your English 109 workshop section on October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2010. We met in the Modern Languages building, and I was able to arrive slightly early and sit while students entered the class. Your classroom has a strange layout: a conference table in the middle of the room around which about ten students can sit, and then small desks in rows around the outside of the room. By a few minutes after four, 16 students had arrived for class.

You began the class by discussing a few small issues with academic honesty and citation, and then by asking students to write a reflective memo. Today was the day that the second major assignment in 109, the Evaluation Essay, was due. This memo was intended to accompany the assignment, and to allow students to reflect on their composing process, and to let you know what they still feel they need some work on. This memo will both facilitate student realization about their own learning processes, and it will allow you to be more guided and helpful in the feedback you offer them on these papers, as you read the memos with the essays over the following week. The students were obviously acquainted with these memos, and I believe you likely assigned a similar memo three weeks ago, when the first major 109 essay was collected. You gave students about five minutes to do this writing, and they used this time very industriously. You then collected the Evaluation Essays, with reflective memos attached.

Next, you discussed some housekeeping issues, with a focus on attendance and participation. You did a great job of discussing not just what the class attendance policies were, but also why they exist, what their intentions are, and what students have to gain from participating. I will say, just right off the bat, that you have a very confident and clear teaching style – you have a way with words. You also clearly had a lesson plan and what I might call an “internal script.” It was obvious that you had already thought about your wording, the examples you would use to illustrate points, when you would mention certain students, and so on. This felt organic and thus really buoyed your ethos and allowed for a class with flow and clarity.

At about 4:15, you made a transition into the third major unit of the class, argument. You moved right into a back-and-forth with students, thinking on your feet, drawing students out. You mentioned that the big goal of 109 is to learn “how to write anything,” and so you asked the class what they thought they were learning in class that would be applicable in the rest of their university and “real-world” careers. This was a way to look back at what we have already done, and also to look forward to the argument unit. I have to say that I was very, very impressed with the things that your students said, and how they already understand the ways that writing will be important to them. Smart group. One student even suggested that being persuasive is essential because “the world is a cold and unforgiving place, and if you aren’t persuasive, you will get trampled on.” Wow. Other points were perhaps more precise, more optimistic, and just as deeply considered.

Next, you asked students what came to mind when you said the word “argument.” They called out words and phrases: *fight, for-and-against, gathering your facts, opinion*. This free association allowed you to establish some common ground. You then went into a more “textbook” explanation of argument, looking directly to the class textbook (fittingly). You had prepared a sort of mini-lecture about claims, assumptions, reasoning, evidence – the elements of argument. You then asked students to take this new vocabulary, and to look for these things in an essay example from the textbook, directly applying these concepts. This was a great idea – instead of simply talking about these elements, you asked students to identify them right away and thus to really understand them, as

dynamic “moving” parts of a real essay, not just as abstract concepts. Students read silently (and intently) for about ten minutes. Then you facilitated a discussion of the Kuttner essay on college rankings from *HTWA*. “How far into the essay do we need to go before we understand his opinion?” you asked. Then a student read the claim/thesis of the essay aloud. Another student also pointed out that from the title, or the first sentence of the essay on, the author (Kuttner) was obviously making preliminary claims. “What reasoning does he provide?” you then asked. A student offered a great paraphrase of the rationale behind the argument. Likewise, the class sorted through the evidence offered in the essay, assumptions underlying claims, and even the ways that the author catered arguments for specific audiences. Dynamite.

You then moved along to an activity you called “the jerk store.” You asked students to think and write about a time in their life when they lost an argument. You asked the class to write about what they would say or do now, given the benefit of a second chance.<sup>1</sup> Students wrote in response to this prompt for about ten minutes. Then, several students very enthusiastically shared their stories. You did a great job summarizing the rhetorical strategies that they were using (and sometimes subtly showing that their approaches wouldn’t be effective: “you can’t grab me by the neck and shake me.”)

The next step was to return to the textbook and read another argument essay, again looking for the strategies used by the author. This time students examined an essay by Nancy Gibbs about the athlete Oscar Pistorius and the ethics of his prosthetic “advantage” as a sprinter. You did an excellent job of relating this essay back to Kuttner, and thus making valuable connections. You asked students to map Gibbs’ essay, and its reasoning, back onto Kuttner and the academic sphere, and thus to see both essays in a new light. The students then tried on a wide range of perspectives on the issues raised by Gibbs – these issues were very complicated, all of them. This felt like genuine, invested inquiry and I was very impressed by your students’ thoughts and by your facilitation.

The class ended with some small-group discussion of a relevant and contemporary (though not divisive) issue – groups were encouraged to take a stance on the increasing prevalence of gaming on *Facebook*. They discussed the claims and arguments that they might make, and this discussion was very animated. They were provided with a series of statistics, and they utilized and recombined these stats to make novel assertions. This was a really excellent, creative, and practical activity – a great idea. They were then also asked to turn these claims into graphical depictions. You ran out of time for this last part of the activity, but promised to come back to it in another class. This final activity, because it introduced some small-group discussion, was a great way to end the session while maintaining momentum. It also ensured that in this class, every single student talked, and you provided many ways for students to contribute.

You are a very talented teacher, I am very lucky to have the chance to work with you in teaching 109, and I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to observe you in your habitat.

Sincerely,

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<sup>1</sup> Why the “jerk store”? You explained that this reference came from an episode of *Seinfeld*: George was eating a lot of seafood in a restaurant, and someone said, “Hey George, the ocean called and it wants some shrimp back.” Later, in his car, George is shown, now wishing that he had said, in witty reply, “the jerk store called, and they want you back.” A terrible retort – but a funny example of the concept of the activity.