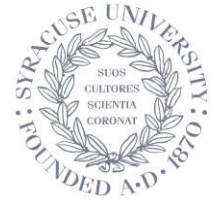


SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
College of Arts and Sciences
Writing Studies, Rhetoric, and Composition



01 December 2017

██████████
H.B. Crouse Hall, Room #018
Syracuse University
Syracuse, NY 13204

Dear ██████,

Thank you for allowing me to observe your class twice this semester, I always enjoy the opportunity of learning from a wide range of teachers as they work with their students.

When I observed your WRT 105 class on November 6th, I was impressed with the classroom community you cultivated through the critical and approachable dialogue you not only fostered with your students but have encouraged between them. I thought your class activities were simple in execution but complex in payoff: you are very clear and specific with what students need to do and at the same time your instruction leaves important room for students to delve deeply into topics of discussion, an opportunity many of them enthusiastically embrace.

You began your class by having students share their thoughts and standout quotes from their reading assignment, Leslie Jamison's "*The Devil's Bait*," a creative non-fiction essay about the Morgellons disease. What I immediately noticed was how prepared your students were for the activity, they were obviously accustomed to the practice of sharing their ideas and while a few had seized on the same quotation, no two students had the same train of thought. I noticed how attentive students were to each other's ideas and most seemed excited to share their own. Even though they were simply sharing something they had taken note of, the entire process, in execution, was an engaging discussion for all involved. As students shared their ideas, you reinstated what they were saying. You validated their thoughts and offered them questions and other ideas that would allow them to clarify and expand on their initial ideas. Your students' reactions to your attentiveness communicates the profound respect they have for you as an instructor.

While this was time well spent, it did take a larger portion of the class period. There was a lot of truly great insights shared and yet trying to remember what 19 other people were sharing is difficult. Considering how attentive your students were to each other, I wondered what they might share with one another working in smaller groups for the duration of the activity instead. Overall I think the tactic you utilized was effective for the period, and I would be interested to learn about the successes you have had with your other approaches to discussion.

After the large group share and discussion, you then transitioned students to a larger conversation about the relationship between science, medicine, and belief. You asked students "What is Morgellons" according to doctors and other experts but then also what it is to the people who claim to experience a disease that the scientific community has relegated as a delusion. Many of your students suggested that the larger issue wasn't whether or not the diagnosis was correct, what was important was helping the people who were afflicted; they reasoned that even if the disease was not real, their delusions would still be and it was in their doctor's best interest to listen to them. From

this discussion point, you seamlessly transitioned your students into a discussion about expertise and research, tying the author's account of her own research for the essay to the credibility of different sources – how an official report from the CDC is valued and utilized differently than first-hand accounts from patients. Students ended this phase of the discussion with a nuanced conversation about the complex, complicated, layered connections between facts and belief.

The important discussion about sources, credibility, and belief was a productive introduction to the importance of research and the how the metrics of a source's credibility shifts as per the situation demands. You then introduced the course's final assignment which asks students to blend something personal, something they are invested in, with research. You went over the different kinds of sources used in different contexts via a well-crafted visual guide created by Portland Community College. You made sure to emphasize that scholarly and professional research can take a long time, years even, but that this time spent ensures that said research is peer-reviewed and sound, unlike the instantaneous nature of a tweet. You also explained how other sources, such as those used by journalists, maintain their credibility by fact-checking their sources for accuracy. This conversation was an effective, tangible way for students to begin to understand why peer-reviewed, academic research is deemed far more credible than other kinds of sources.

For their final activity, you asked students to utilize everything they discussed in class by working in small groups. Students spent the last 20 minutes of class investigating the “unusual histories” of everyday objects: QWERTY keyboards, Kotex, Aluminum Foil, and Graham Crackers. Students needed to find 2 reputable sources and one other source. Observing your students working in small groups, I could see that they were intrigued by the assignment and eager to find answers. There was a lot of conversation between students as they searched for sources. I could overhear students deliberate some of the more sensational histories and why they were more than likely false. They also reported their findings to the larger group with confidence and could articulate why their reputable sources were “reputable.” Students brought up that the institutions themselves have ethos with the public, that a source from the Smithsonian is more than likely reputable because of the reputation the Smithsonian has in society. They also found that there were multiple accounts for the history of these everyday objects, but that some stories seemed more plausible than others not just because of the source these explanations came from but also because of the logic of the account.

Overall, I think you consistently provide students with variety in your lessons. They embrace sharing their understanding of the readings with a large group, they readily explore the larger implications of what they have read, and they connect classroom activities back to these important classroom discussions. It is very clear that your students are not only comfortable with you but each other, you have built an engaged classroom community. It has been a pleasure to observe your classes and I look forward to seeing what ideas you bring to your WRT 205 classroom in the Spring.

Sincerely,

Noah P. Wilson
Assistant Director of TA Education
Doctoral Student, Composition and Cultural Rhetoric