

Eng. 957 Fall 2000
Prof. Debbie Minter
Journal Entry Assignment—DUE Sept. 6

Observing and Participating in a Classroom

For next week's journal, I'd like you to serve as a participant-observer for at least 75 minutes during a meeting of one of the graduate seminars in which you are currently enrolled.

Being both a participant and an observer in a classroom can be challenging because each of these roles carries a set of demands. Fortunately, these demands can overlap in mutually enriching ways. (As students, for example, we're probably used to paying attention to the student culture of a classroom—small moments of resistance or compliance, moments of community building among students, etc. That capacity also serves us well as observers of classrooms.) Of course, it is also possible for the demands of these roles to conflict periodically, requiring the participant-observer to make choices (sometimes uneasy choices, as Brueggemann's essay later in the semester will suggest).

PREPARATION. It is important to spend some time, prior to your class observation, preparing by:

- Consulting with the teacher: In most cases of formal classroom observation, it is crucial to meet with the teacher ahead of time so that the teacher can provide you important contextualizing information (such as syllabi, assignment sequences, formative goals, teaching philosophy, etc.) and, if necessary, consent. *In the participant observations of a single meeting of a graduate course for the purposes of this journal assignment, this step is optional because our work is really quite informal and limited in scope.* In the peer observations that we'll do later in the semester, this step is required.
- A pre-observation free-write: Take 15 minutes to describe the course and what you expect of this class meeting (based on your prior experience and/or course materials that may forecast the work of this particular meeting).

IN THE CLASSROOM. Here are two options for taking notes on classrooms:

- Jot brief (but legible and useful) notes to yourself at 10–15 minute increments about what is going on at that moment *in addition to* taking notes—regardless of the timing—on events/exchanges that are striking to you. (The shorter the class, the shorter the increment of observation—at least every 10 minutes in a 50-minute class meeting.) After the class meeting, these incremental notes function in two ways. First, the notes help you keep track of what was going on when (i.e., how long students worked in small groups). Second, they jog your memory about threads of course content or discussion that you can flesh out in more detail when you sit down to do a more formal write-up of what you observed.

- Jot brief (but legible and useful) notes to yourself in response to specific things that you're watching for (i.e., student-teacher interaction; the unfolding of a discussion). Each time you're moved to write down an observation, also take note (and write down) the time. This helps you reconstruct the class meeting afterwards.

NOTE: While the larger purpose of these notes is to function as a kind of “recorder” of the event (absent actual tape or video equipment), I find it useful to keep track of my own internal responses—particularly moments where I (as observer/participant) feel uncomfortable or disoriented. I try to pay close attention to (and take notes on) what's going on at that moment and how I'm feeling. I save a fuller “sorting out” for later, in an effort to stay on top of my role, in the moment, as “recorder.” (Sometimes these internal response notes don't take me anywhere—and I leave them out of the write-up; sometimes, though, they open up whole new avenues of inquiry for me.)

AFTER THE OBSERVATION. As soon as possible after the observation, draft more fully what you observed and how you interpret what you observed. There are several possible ways to do this. One possibility is the double-entry notebook form that we experimented with earlier in the semester: Running down one-side of the page is your representation of what you observed (reconstructed from your notes)—who did what/said what when, and what happened next. Running down the opposite side of the page is your sense of the significance of particular moments in the observation. In this journal response, please make an effort to protect the identities of students and teachers in the course you're observing. (We'll talk further, in class, about this issue and strategies to address it).

For your journal due next week, I'd like you to staple together your pre-writing, your note-taking during the observation, the fuller representation of the class with your commentary and a short response to any three of the following questions:

- How is knowledge made during this class meeting? (What are the process(es) of knowledge making that are enacted/implied or made explicit? Who participates in this process and how?)
- What seems to be the important work of this class meeting and how did its importance become visible to you?
- How does writing (published or unpublished) figure in this particular class meeting?
- What kinds of interactions (among students, among the teacher(s) and students, among the teacher(s), students and text(s)) are most common?
- What differences do you see between what you try to do (as a teacher of undergraduate writing) and what the teacher(s) in this classroom is/are trying to do? How might you account for those differences?
- Based on this experience, what important differences and similarities do you see between being in the classroom as a student and being in the classroom as a participant-observer? What (if any) shifts in attention were required?