

OBSERVATION NOTES

Deborah Minter

Class-visit February 2000

Composition & Literature II

50-minute class session

Classroom Inquiry Notes Toward Recommendation Letter:

Tone highly contractual (legalistic?)

Quality of required texts looks great. (Ask about texts I don't know first hand)

First day to talk about Lazarre. 'Suspect there will be some struggling with the text. They like Wolff.' Wants to get initial readings on the table so that we can begin to complicate those readings/examine them in the coming course readings.

Wants to draw students' attention to rhetorical issues—some key terms/ideas they might use to think about their own writing.

10:30

class looks full, ready to start class. Inst. talking privately with a student at front

class business/announcements

—class visit by artist-in residence (AIR)/ last class mtg)

—shifts in syllabus

—questionnaire req'd by AIR

10:35

Students working on questionnaire (Nice job of incorporating institutional request in productive ways—explaining their interest in student response/eval)

10:40

Writing Prompt: Discuss connections between/among artist/performer, Wolff (students just finished book), Lazarre (students just started) in terms of:

- Ideas from these writers which most interest you (& why)
- what they offer you as a writer in terms of writing strategies, voice, tone, craft style [wow, big prompt]—diligent bunch. Clear my presence was a little disruptive for them.

Task-oriented. Not much chit-chat among them. Climate/Culture?

10:50

"Looks like people are still hard at work, writing. Let's go a little longer...."

Instr. is also writing. *Real attentive to people's writing energy—impressive. (*Extended* in-class writing time, so important. I need to do more of that too.) Inst. shares a bit of her writing and her exp. w/prompt: "I only got through 1 and 1/2...."

S1:"She [author] capitalized 'Black' but not white... Seeing the word capitalized made it a race issue..." "She gets me so mad—she wants me to be ashamed that I'm white and that I'm a woman she makes race an issue in everything...."

A few students start talking, excitedly, at once.

INSTR: (smiling) You've plunged us into 10 different complicated issues at once (race, gender, style shapes response...)...Where I'm sort of lost is that she wants you to be ashamed of your whiteness; where I'm really lost is your sense that she wants you to be ashamed of your gender.

S1 explains and reads an excerpt from pg. 49. (Good move; that the student knows to support her reading with evidence from the text. Still, interpretation of that passage is kinda' wild).

INSTR: OK that helps me with race, I'm still lost on gender.

S1 rephrases her concerns. (Still strikes me as reactionary and superficial reading; but I like that this student tries, again, with new words to make herself understood).

11:00

INSTR: Writes on board as student talks (nobody seems to notice: maternal perspective; feminism? race; sense/source of shame?) [A lot of talking among themselves]

Another student (S2) joins in takes the floor by being a bit louder—offers critique of Student 1's reading (side conversations subside), S2 tries to use words on the board in offering a reading.

INSTR nods, calls on another student (S3); a fourth student (S4) takes the floor

INSTR. returns to comments made by S2 but refers to moments in talk by S1, 3 & 4 and uses this synthesis as a means of turning students' attention to the idea of "narrator's credibility":

11:15

Think about this idea (narrator's credibility) for next time: as you read, what makes this writer credible (or what harms her credibility) given the highly controversial issues she takes up via her memoir.

Has responses to student writing to return.

A few students stay behind to talk. (I gotta run to class).

Class-visit February 2000
Eng. 254 Creative Non-fiction
50-minute class session

Notes on syllabus and instructor's goals for the class from conversation w/ instr.:

Students reading selections from Lopate's *Art of the Personal Essay* throughout the whole semester so they're in the habit of having only a day or two to talk about a selection. For class mtg: "Execution of Tropmann," Turgenev. Early in the semester, building on instructor's sense of the first-year composition courses (150,151, 101, 102) that most students will have had. Reading, early in the semester, essays that depend on narrative for their argument but wanting to look closer at some of the literary devices that these essayists use. Notice that there aren't many organizing principles to the day-to-day readings provided on the syllabus. Wonder if that would help students with/remind students of the organizing idea behind the group of assignments they are reading?

1:30

Lots of chatter, jeez what a loud (but fun) group!

INSTR: OK, let's get started.

What do we know about Turgenev from the introductory material editor provides? long silence. (Good at waiting quietly; giving students time to think and signaling to them with nonverbal clues that it's ok to take some time to think.)

S1: Editor calls author "forerunner of literary journalism" Says his personal experience with injustice that brings him to this political work

S2: This reading reminds me of *Dead Man Walking*. What was it (the execution) proving? Maybe it backs up my position...against the death penalty...

INSTR: OK, I'm going to hold you off there for a minute. So "forerunner of literary journalism" what does that mean?

S3: "It seems more like a short story...." Mentions moments where the "story" moves from one scene to the next, "white space between various paragraphs"

INSTR: Good observation. So what effect does the scene break have on you?

S3: It gets my mind "ready" to shift focus. The breaks also helped me because he has really long paragraphs (some laughter).

1:40

S4: I didn't get how he handles the scene of the execution?

S5: Yeah, there's no detail there. There's a lot of detail—makes you feel like you're there—and then...nothing...

INSTR: Well, part of his story—he turned away. Maybe it's short because he didn't see it...

S2: (interrupting) It reminds me of Capote's *In Cold Blood*—that book rocks. Reads passage from T. where time seems to shift (I'm a little confused.)

INSTR: Interesting. What he's doing with time there. I hadn't thought about it until you brought it up. See the similarity....

S6:...and to *Dead Man Walking*.

S2: But what do you think about capital punishment? I mean, the editor says it's his experience with injustice that brings him to this political work. I'm thinking T. is opposed to capital punishment. Are you?

INSTR: Well...it's important that Turgenev makes clear...that this is someone convicted of killing an entire family. He could have chosen, perhaps, a more sympathetic character—someone convicted of some lesser offense...he doesn't. I suppose, thinking of this murdered family...particularly as relatives of mine...very first instinct...want...convicted killer to “pay”...but, that's “first instinct.” Do I want to live in a society that moves by “first instincts”? For me, that's where this gets complicated. But what do you make of this narrator? There's this spectacle of the guillotine, he turns away—is he culpable somehow? Is he a part of the problem?

S4: There's all this shifting from “I” to “he/she”...it's really confusing....

1:55

INSTR: (looks at watch)...starts writing on the board as S4 is talking: Literary journalism, point of view/opinion/bias?, story, scene breaks, sensory detail (I glance around the room; notice that students look engaged—even those who aren't taking speaking roles in the conversation; some are looking at the student as she finished talking and nodding their heads; others looking up at the board. Nobody really takes notes. But seem engaged.)

INSTR. stops to take class through these terms using students' language during the conversation to elaborate on these features of literary journalism. She turns back on that question of perspective/point of view/bias. Suggests that one feature of literary journalism that marks it as separate from other kinds of journalism/newspaper reporting is that the writer's perspective is foregrounded/acknowledged as a perspective or as a lens.

One student (S7) kinda breaks in/jokes...“maybe that's why he's always by himself...emphasizes that the perspective is his...?” “I thought he was alone a lot because he's pretentious and self-absorbed...” (laughter)

INSTR. laughs: “There is a risk, isn't there? In some of these devices/techniques. There's some indeterminacy that opens up...possibility of confusion.”

2:05:

INSTR.: I've got some responses to give back to you before you go. Look at the syllabus for next assignment... For the last word, let's revert to ritual: first one to speak gets the last word."

(Notice back-and-forth movement that I struggle with in my own teaching. A student speaks and then I speak. Sometimes, useful b/c I can reposition/rephrase and invite others into the conversation. Risk—it becomes a conversation btw. student and me. Want to follow-up on this. Wonder if instr. has thoughts on this?)