Observation Reflection

26 February 2017

Right from the beginning, I was very impressed by how engaged and talkative the students were, even before class started. Maybe this is the difference between required introductory course like ENGL101, and a class students choose to be in (I observed Yosef in a Shakespeare class). That being said, it also just depends on the group of students in the room. Still, this was the most obvious difference between my class, and remained prevalent throughout the class.

For some reason, this class felt more structured than what my 101 classes have been, though there were mainly similarities. It was interesting, then, to see how slightly different dynamics and personalities can affect the classroom. Yosef arrived before anyone else did and set up the projector and computer for his lesson. The environment felt very welcoming, and Yosef seemed to have a rapport with the students, as most of them were very chatty before class started (even just with each other). Again, this was a huge difference with my class. The students barely respond when we try to engage with them before class begins and do not interact with one another. While my class is a completely different context and with different people and different dynamics, this made me want to try even harder to engage the students in the few minutes before class starts.

Additionally, what was really evident to me in this class was how during discussion, the students, professor, and TA all built off one another during the discussions. This might partly be because I’m coming from the position of an observer rather than a participant–which I never have been before. The distance made it easier to see. Still, as a TA, this is always something I have struggled with–knowing when to take what a student says and build on it more or clarify it for others. It felt very organic in this class. Maybe I just have to be a little more confident in my own thoughts and opinions.

It was also great to see some of the facilitating tactics we talked about last semester in 388V at work. While we use them every day ENGL101, they’re easier to identify and observe as an outsider. The class structure was a mix of lecture (with questions and student engagement), small group discussion, and then a larger group wrap-up. Again, it helps when students actually want to be in a Shakespeare class, rather than required Academic Writing. Other tactics I recognized (from both 388V and my own class) were giving sufficient wait-time when waiting for responses, asking if students need clarification before moving on, and keeping them involved in the lecture portion of the class. Additionally, during the group work, both Yosef and the professor moved around between groups and added to/guided the discussions. This is something that Doug and I do as well.

One of the main differences between my class and this class was that whoever wasn’t teaching (either the professor or the TA) sat in the rows. Even the professor sat in the rows when Yosef was leading the class. This is hugely different from my class because even if I’m not standing in front of the room talking, I sit in the front, facing the students. The set-up of my classroom probably works better for me and my personality–because I would be less likely to add to the conversation if I wasn’t sitting up front, in more of a co-teacher position.

From an objective perspective, it was obvious that everyone in the class–students, TA, and professor–all cared about the subject matter and could get excited about it. All of the groups were on topic during group work (though not necessarily each person in the group). I did notice, also, that when the teacher or TA was not present in the group, one person would dominate the conversation. When they were in the group, the conversation was much more exactly that–a conversation. Additionally, the TA knew the material and historical context for the class extremely well, and that came across to the students. There was a good balance between lecture and discussion, and everything fit into the class. One of the problems with our 50 minute 101 class is that we feel like we’re always rushing to fit everything in–because the syllabus is so packed. It was nice to be in a class where that wasn’t necessarily the case.

Overall, it was good and refreshing to see another TA’s class. I miss hearing about everyone’s experiences and perspectives, and how different classes run. There were things that I picked up in this observation that I want to work a little harder at–like talking to the students in the few minutes before class starts. I can’t force my students to engage with us, but these little conversational moments might help.