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UNIVERSITY WRITING PROGRAM

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Dear Jennifer,

It's the end of June. I observed your WRIT 1133 class May 1. If anybody understands that, it would be you. Nevertheless, I do have my extensive notes and fond memories of the class I observed.

You began class by asking how everything was going with them. What a great opening. The one thing I have noted in my observations during my time as AD is that social capital goes a long way, so thanks for treating them like humans. You then proceeded to show a video of relaxing breathing exercises that was part of a common opening activity that you called the "Moment of Zen." For a class themed on happiness, it seemed apropos. After this, you shared with students a PowerPoint of aggregate data from mid-term feedback that they had provided you. Students seemed to appreciate these moments of Zen, but also shared the common contradictions of any feedback—some like group work/style/extra resources/writing logs, and some don't. I appreciated that you had graphed these responses out, as a sort of layered meta-moment to show the reporting of empirical feedback while also talking about the feedback and how to address it. You made that more explicit by transitioning into the pre-class meditation/relaxation exercises and asking them about how they might study these moments of Zen. Students volunteered responses such as finding more sources, considering the limitations of a class devoted to happiness, the age of the sample, and even the environmental conditions of the class space. You met their responses with enthusiastic affirmations, but also, occasionally paraphrasing in keywords what they were saying, which is a good strategy because it makes it clear that they were heard but it also allows you to guide the discussion in a focused way. At this point, you revealed that the survey they took on the moments of Zen was flawed in a number of ways (sneaky!). There were spelling mistakes, and the responses were not really common response options that we would see on a professional survey. You led students in a discussion as to how they might revise the survey to better capture the data that they wanted, and students offered a number of good suggestions, including needing informed consent. You then moved into talking about designing a happiness survey together and how they would share interviews and survey data as part of their projects. You then introduced a video clip from 20/20 on the happiest countries. The clip and your prepared remarks were about how there was a measure of "Gross National Happiness," and that was how countries as different as Denmark and Singapore could be compared, two notable countries with very different populations and governments. You asked them how and what we should measure if we wanted to look at happiness, which seemed a sound way to think about a shared survey, but alas, the time for the 50-minute class was over, and it was time to go.

The 50-minute classes move fast. By layering the presentation of the midterm feedback with a discussion about survey design, layered with topics already researched on the topic or subset of the topic was a smart, carefully planned move. Such layering encourages engagement because students have to pay attention to see all the moving parts. Sure, sometimes one or more of the layers might not get full coverage, but that's just teaching and has nothing to do with the time limit and everything to do with the cognitive limitations of humans. I watched Heather teach her 50 minute classes, and her approach, rather than layering, is a rapid-fire, highly structured delivery. I don't think it is better, just different. I didn't have a great concern about layering too much in your class since the layers were deepest in transition moments, so you had carefully thought out how to do this. It was just a strategy that I observed, and I think it keeps students on their toes. I noted in the feedback that students were concerned about receiving feedback in a timely manner. On one hand, no matter how fast (or how purposeful) we space feedback, it's never perfect with all students. That said, have you considered alternative models? I know you



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probably have observed Blake's whole-class workshops on one or two papers. If you participate, then that's fewer papers to provide additional comments on. You might also participate in peer review. Have fixed peer review groups, and participate in one or two of those during a session, so that's 3-4 fewer papers you don't need to offer additional feedback on. Small group review sessions during an office hour so that you don't have to schedule 45 separate sessions is another strategy. Dan and Sarah will split their review sessions over a normal class time so only half the class appears for 30 minutes, another for the next 30 minutes (you could still make that work in a 50-minute class). Maybe you have tried these things. I just wanted to remind you that if you keep getting stacks of 45 papers at fixed intervals, you will eventually burst into flames, and unless you are secretly a phoenix, I don't think the outcome of that is good. We aren't all (or need to be) Doug who seems to revel in writing lengthy responses to even the smallest homework assignments.

Sincerely,
Richard



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Dear Jennifer,

Thank you for inviting me to visit your WRIT 1133 class on April 29, 2015. This was a 50 minute class, so the time went quickly, but you had a clear lesson plan and goal for the day. You intended to introduce them to the online setup for sharing and collaborating on their “happiness” (the course topic) research project IMRAD reports and a discussion and activity for writing the introductions for their studies. In your lesson plan you sent me, you had indicated some discussion about their research protocols as well, but you smartly moved this to the next week as it probably would have been too much.

You began by showing a PowerPoint slide of the schedule for the day and a confirmation that each student had received an email inviting them to a Google Doc folder with research components already uploaded. You quickly showed them the Method and Bibliography documents. You then moved on to the Literature Reviews for their papers and used the metaphor of cooking versus baking to show how the IMRAD genre is more like baking in that students should follow the recipe but can have some add-ins. You proceeded to have a PowerPoint slide question asking them about what goes in an Introduction and what the add-ins would be. They were then to get into groups of four students to generate a list to answer this question. They were to do this on a shared document in Google Docs, presumably in their newly accessibly research project folders. You walked around and talked with groups during this process which lasted about 5 minutes. You then asked them to discuss what goes in an introduction. From my vantage point, the students tended to look at a handout on Canvas rather than the document that they were just writing in, and then even you referred back to the handout as well. This was one of the moments were I wondered whether it would have been better to have them go back and synthesize the responses on the shared document so it didn't seem like busy work to them. But I get it—50 minutes. You then tasked them with finding some sources, and you provided them with a clear heuristic that focused them on defining terms, providing context, and referring to previous studies. Students asked questions about things such as whether they could use their own definitions or how to cite, and you answered those questions succinctly. You walked around and talked with each group as they worked on this research task. You began wrapping up the session by forecasting the next week's module on Canvas, which I thought was a good strategy, and then ended by sharing an article from Health magazine about happiness that seemed to focus on women only. I really liked this final moment as it encouraged them to think about the issue, but it was also a nice shift into something different before the class was over, where they could feel like experts as a group.

The class session had a nice balance of active engagement and teaching, but I wondered in that 50 minutes whether your expertise and organizing took precedence over a few additional teaching moments. It's those spaces when we are covering a lot in a short amount of time that we fall into this trap of giving an answer rather than exploring an issue (I'm often just as guilty). When they ask questions, it's sometimes a good idea to ask a question back to the student to confirm the extent that they understand something, and to also encourage them to think through something before seeking an answer elsewhere. To the question, “can we use our own definitions in the introduction,” an answer might be to the student, “how would you do that?” But 50 minutes. And you had a nice activity that had them begin collecting research for their introductions that needed attending to. Would that we could sit by a stream under a plane tree all day. Except, well, Socrates was the worst about those teaching moments since he always seemed to have an answer. Nevermind. You are awesome. I'd gladly take your class and enjoy it.

Sincerely,
Richard