

Sara Kelm
9 October 2017
TCC
Observation Memo

Identity and Integrity

In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer talks about how good teaching flows out of a teacher's personal identity and integrity. By this he means the nexus of factors that make up our selfhoods impacts how we teach – and that is a good thing! In my observations of Tyler Dukes, Micah-Jade Coleman Stanbeck, and Kayla Sparks, I had the opportunity to realize once again how much teaching is tied to individual personality and identity. Though two of the three were on the “standard” 10803 syllabus, their classes looked very different, in a way that reminded me the value of continually striving to know oneself, both as a person and as a teacher, in order to teach well.

The three women who I observed had different classroom personas which affects the classroom culture. Kayla was laid back, and she clearly had an informal rapport with her students (a observation supported by tales she has told of students feeling free to cry in her presence). Tyler was a bit more authoritarian yet approachable. Micah-Jade teased her students and pushed them to think outside of the traditional composition box. These personas manifest in the types of activities they had their students do and in how they related to their students as they worked on those activities. All three had students work independently for part of the class period, and students participated in these activities in a way that reflected both the teacher's persona and the class culture that had developed in the first four weeks of the semester.

Also, in all three classes, something went wrong or had to be adjusted. One of the hallmarks of teaching is unpredictability. Both Kayla and Micah-Jade had an adjusted schedule

due to cancelled classes. Tyler had a number of absent and late students. Micah-Jade had issues with technology. Kayla had to combine activities. Tyler scrapped an activity because her class indicated they needed more work time. In each case, the teacher may have felt like the class was falling apart, but from an observational perspective, the teachers responded appropriately and calmly. In each class, learning was accomplished. Though the classes may not have gone as smoothly as planned, adjustments were barely noticeable. Even if they had been noticeable, the class would have ended, and all students would have returned the next class period. Rarely are “disasters” irreparable.

Ultimately, I was reminded that all teachers have their ways of interacting with students, focusing on course content, and planning a class period. What works for Micah-Jade may not work for me, and that’s fine. But having the chance to observe her work gives me a window into other options and opportunities for conveying material. While I cannot do exactly what Kayla does, I shouldn’t try. Instead, I should listen, observe, and try new things, adapting them to fit my identity and integrity.

From: Kelm, Sara S.KELM@tcu.edu
Subject: Re: Notes on 10803 Observation for Monday 9/18
Date: September 19, 2017 at 11:45 AM
To: Tyler Dukes TYLER.JEAN.DUKES@tcu.edu
Cc: Carrie Leverenz c.leverenz@tcu.edu

SK

Tyler,

I appreciate being able to observe you yesterday (Monday, September 18)! I feel like you were attentive to your students' needs and provided them with the time they needed to work with their partners on their projects.

We talked before class started and you indicated that you were going to adjust your lesson plan slightly. The class would be centered on in-class work time guided by questions on a handout, with the possibility of explaining the Socratic circle activity at the end of the class period. You told me that you had heard your students' anxieties about the project and wanted to focus on allaying their panic instead of moving on to the next activity. You expressed that maybe it wasn't a good day for me to observe, but I feel like the class period demonstrated a lot about your strengths as a teacher, particularly your ability to be flexible and listen to your students' needs.

You started class right at 8 AM, and you noted aloud to your students that you hoped more students would arrive shortly since attendance was, in your words, "dismal" at that point. Ten students were present at the start of class (though a few more came in shortly after). You had students find their partners (if their partners were present), and you asked them to take out their computers. You let them know that they could use their phones for the in-class activity/work time, but they would have to transcribe the answers to the questions on the handout, which you showed them how to find in D2L via the screen up front. You also handed hard copies to students without computers, which was a nice consideration. While most students or pairs had computers, some did not, and they were still able to complete the activity.

You went through the questions on the handout, explaining that the purpose of the questions was to help them collect and organize their thoughts for the project. You also had them record what informal research they were doing, and you included social media presences of the places/organizations in that research. It hadn't occurred to me to have students look at the place's social media accounts. I think I will mention this possibility when talking with my students about their background research for their projects.

Next you showed students GoogleDocs. Most of the students had experience with the service, which shouldn't surprise me (but does). You showed them how to share documents with their partners, and the pair sitting next to me had no trouble setting up their document in GoogleDocs. They were both working on the same document with ease. At least for them, it was successful! For the few students without experience with GoogleDocs, you explained what its purpose was and how it could help partners work collaboratively.

At the end of the introduction to this activity, you had (what I call) a "come to Jesus" moment, where you told students that they must turn in papers at the beginning of the class period instead of arriving late and thus turning in their papers part of the way through class. You noted that this practice was disruptive to the rest of the class, and from now on, papers must be turned in at the start of class. Also, you emphasized that everything needs an author's note from here on out, and future assignments without an author's note will not be graded. While this moment is never fun (I had a similar moment with my class yesterday), it seemed necessary. You may want to reiterate it in an email, since I'm not sure everyone was present when you said these things, and the late students may be the ones who need to hear it most. On the other hand, if they missed information, they missed information. So it's up to you if you want to make sure everyone is on the same page regarding these policies or if you want them to learn from experience.

Sixteen students were in class by 8:09 AM, and they began working on the handout in their teams. You also indicated that teams should feel free to ask you questions. You clarified some general questions about the handout to the large group, but primarily the students worked quietly with their partners. You did tell everyone that in the last 10-15 minutes, each group will share what they did that day, along with their topic. I thought this was a strong pedagogical choice, since it gave some accountability to the groups. Throughout class, you checked in on various groups and individual students, particularly those who arrived late. You explained the assignment and where to find it a few different times. I noticed you spoke with a young man near the door whose partner wasn't present. You seemed to be workshoping and brainstorming with him, since he didn't have anyone to work with.

Toward the end of the class period, you gave the class a four minute warning before all groups would report back. You had each group tell the rest of the class about the place they decided on and what work they did today as you took notes. The room is set up in a half-circle shape, which I think works well for this sort of activity. All students are facing each other, which keeps people focused on the person talking. In talking about his team's project, one student fumbled in mispronouncing "Chi," and some of the students laughed at him. While this all seemed to be done in fun, you followed up by saying how little you also knew about Greek life. Your interjection smoothed over a potentially uncomfortable moment for the student.

At the end of the class period, you gave students a copy of the reading for the next class period, as well as instructions for the Socratic circle. I had to leave quickly to get to my class, but it seemed like class wrapped up well, though a little frantically (and I hope it wasn't because of me!). While you may not have gotten through everything you had planned in the class period, the students seemed to really need the time to work and make crucial decisions for the project together. In this way, I feel like you were receptive to your students' concerns and needs, slowing down your teaching to give them time to really practice what they are learning. As for the class dynamics, I did not notice anything specific in regards to the athletes. They seemed mostly quiet, letting their partners take the lead. I'm sure their presence is more felt when it comes to large group discussions or other whole class activities. On the whole, it seemed like most groups were working diligently — and even if they weren't, that decision is their own.

In terms of suggestions, I gave one above about emailing students, re-emphasizing your policies about turning in work and author's notes, though I can see why you would choose not to send such an email. Also, I was thinking about how you had to repeat yourself a few times as people wandered in. I wonder if you could use a powerpoint or information on the whiteboard to indicate what students are supposed to do and where they are supposed to find the information, so that you do not have to say the same things over and over. Finding ways to make

students take initiative would save you some time/energy. I think it was smart that you didn't begin with the most crucial information at the very start of class, since people do come in late. I have a late policy to try to motivate people to arrive at class on time, but I think with 8 AM courses always have to deal with those who woke up late. Lastly, I think setting up the Socratic circle, even with a sentence or two, would have provide some context for the activity (which I assume is happening on Wednesday). Maybe you did so in an earlier class, but a very brief introduction may help students understand the purpose of the assignment and how they should interact with the handout you gave at the end of class.

Overall, I thought the class went really well. I really enjoyed watching you work with students, and I will definitely be considering how I can incorporate in my own teaching some of the approaches I saw you enacting. Please let me know if you have any questions about my observation and remarks above, and thanks again for allowing me the chance to watch you work!

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From: Kelm, Sara S.KELM@tcu.edu
Subject: Re: Tomorrow's Lesson
Date: September 20, 2017 at 9:13 PM
To: Micah-Jade Stanback m.coleman@tcu.edu
Cc: Carrie Leverenz c.leverenz@tcu.edu

SK

Micah-Jade,

It was my pleasure to come in and observe your class today (Wednesday, Sept. 20 at 8 AM). I know that the class period started off a bit rocky, but you recovered well and ultimately it seemed like a very productive class session.

The class period began with you trying to technology in the room work. For some reason, the computer was very slow to turn on. I attempted to help (with little success), then I ducked in the hallway to attempt to call IT. They were not yet open, as it was shortly before 8 AM. Because of this, I missed the very beginning of class during which you gave some information to your students. It seemed like you may have been talking about the RAP that they turned in at the beginning of class. I did hear your pre-class exasperation with students who did not staple their drafts. Perhaps you reminded the whole class to staple their RAPs before class while I was out in the hall, but if you did not, that may be something to repeat to the entire class (for your own sanity).

All 20 students were present by 8:07 AM, which I find amazing! You did an activity today where you showed three different types of media and asked students to identify the subject of each, the angle (what is the creator trying to say?), and the support (how do you know what the creator is trying to say?). You provided them with a handout that had space to write answers for each example.

Once the technology began to work (approximately 3-5 minutes into class), you started the activity by showing students a still photograph of an art piece titled "1968 (Broken)" by Doug Aitken. Initially, I was unsure about you starting the activity with the art piece, because I've found that students struggle to understand art. Your students really engaged with the art, though, and participated in the discussion. First, you gave them two minutes of silent work time, in which you recommended they use their computers to find the context. Many of them did so, which provided them with additional information to contribute about the year 1968. All students seemed to be using their computers for the intended purpose, which was again impressive to me. Students asked some questions about the piece of art that helped aid understanding. For example, from the back of the room, I couldn't tell that the piece was composed of mirrors. Perhaps giving them that crucial information up front would have been helpful, though I can also see an argument for revealing that information after they have had time to think it through.

When you did the activity together as a class, you used the whiteboard at the side of the classroom, since the image was being projected over the whiteboard at the front of the room. From my seat, I could not see what you wrote on the whiteboard at all. Granted, I was in the back corner, but I doubt that many in my row could see well. Perhaps if you plan to use that side whiteboard, have students vacate the row closest to that whiteboard.

You did the same process for a clip from *American Psycho*, and the students seemed wholly unfamiliar with the film. This time, though, you had them analyze the clip in pairs. You approached groups that seemed to be having a hard time, and repeatedly asked "What are you thinking?" You encouraged students to write down any and all things that they noticed from the clip. You also encouraged them not to second guess themselves and just "write it down!" You provided them with some context about the movie (though, like a good lit PhD student, you said the book was better), as you wandered the classroom, up and down the very narrow aisles between desks. After three minutes, the whole class once again talked through the different categories. This time, you asked to hear from people you hadn't yet heard from. You called on a few folks, which reminded me that I need to do that more. I liked that you "warned" them that you would be calling on them if they hadn't already spoken. The activity was low stakes, and so students seemed willing to engage. You did call out a student for being on his phone, though he countered that he was looking up the movie.

This example was a little more challenging than the art piece. While it went well, they may not have had all the context they needed for the movie, though the clip was a good representation. In thinking about this activity, I wonder about other self-contained clips you might find, maybe something nonfictional (like on Youtube). This clip worked well, I think, but you had to prompt them more. I wonder if another option could function more clearly as a transition from the purely visual piece to the written piece about place.

You then transitioned to the written article by asking them how looking at visual representations and finding their angles would help the students find angles in writing. I thought this was a great aid to transfer for the students, though, like Carrie said, often it is easier to identify these elements in someone else's work than enact these principles. It will be interesting to see if this understanding shows up in their first drafts.

The final selection was a piece from the article "The Year without Toilet Paper" from the New York Times. The class read it aloud together, popcorn style. I never think I have time to do something like read aloud in a 50 minute period, but you used your time very well and did not seem rushed. You reminded the students to read actively while the piece was being read aloud. Then you gave them three minutes to analyze this text according to the three categories. They did well, though they struggled a little with the angle, since it isn't obvious in the text. You pointed to places in the text implicitly that served as support for the angle, but doing so more explicitly may help. Also looking at the structure of the piece might be interesting (though that was outside the scope of the activity). You also did a good job of asking leading questions when they seemed to be stuck.

You finished by reminding the students that they need to have an angle in their drafts for Friday. You finished pretty much right on time! I think this activity was great, and I would love to do it in my own class. The transition between the visual representations and the textual was much needed, and I wondered about ways that you might further support transfer, maybe by adding in a short time at the end where they apply these same three categories to their own writing (or what they think they will write). That way it transitions from something that they notice to something they enact. I think too pointing out how the NYT piece is actually a profile of a place (and a family) might help them make further connections between this article and the work they are producing. Also, I don't remember if you mentioned the visuals that they will be including in their final draft; given the visual nature of the first two examples in the activity, that would be a good connection for them to make

about how their visuals need to support their overall angle.

Overall, your class seemed to go very well after the rocky beginning. You have a great rapport with the class, and they seem attentive and participatory. I very much enjoyed observing your class, and I appreciate having the chance to come and see you at work! Thank you!

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