

Dear Madison,

It was such a pleasure to observe your teaching in VMS 261S, “Moving Image Practice,” yesterday. Even with no experience in or understanding of cinematography, I was captivated by your lesson and learned a fair deal about traditional documentary storytelling from it!

At the very start of class, you re-introduced yourself to the students, who, I presume, knew you primarily in a TA role before today’s class. This gave you an opportunity to mention your professional experience in news media, establishing yourself early-on, even before you had begun the lesson, as a clear authority on the subject matter. While speaking, you positioned yourself at the front of the room and took care to step out of the projector light so that you could better see the students.

You began the lesson by asking the students, “who in the class is interested or drawn to traditional nonfiction documentaries?” In a turn of events that I’m all too familiar with, the question fell flat, with only one student raising his hand to express interest. I’m not sure if this was the response you expected from the class, but you handled it marvelously. What some instructors might have taken as a setback or a lack of enthusiasm for their subject matter you took as an opportunity to stress how everybody, even those interested in more experimental strands of filmmaking, stands to learn a thing or two about the fundamentals of storytelling in the traditional nonfiction documentary format.

You proceeded to walk the class through a short slideshow that introduced some key concepts in traditional nonfiction documentary storytelling. Your manner here was confident but casual and you frequently paused to engage students and give examples of how you have applied these concepts in your own work. During this presentation, I noticed that the nearly all of the students were alert and paying attention. Only one student was looking down at his laptop. When another one of your questions (“who knows what a talking head is?”) was met with silence, you recovered and called upon a student at the front of the class who was nodding his head. He seemed comfortable with your calling upon him in this way and proceeded to describe his understanding of the concept.

In the slideshow portion of your lesson, the students seemed particularly impressed with the example of the news segment by Steve Hartman. After watching the clip, you posed an open-ended question to the class: “what did you like?” Students clamored to volunteer answers. You fielded five different answers from the class, though there were even more raised hands than that. You made sure to respond thoughtfully to each student’s answer while also observing links between their answers and the concepts you were teaching.

At this point in the lesson, you divided the class into “random” pairs, which you had listed earlier on the slide deck. I’m curious, how random were these pairs? Did you intentionally pair certain persons or personalities with others? Speaking for myself, I often struggle with dividing my students into groups. Usually, for no good reason other than lack of preparation, I let them self-select into groups

of their own choosing or divide them up based on where in the class they are sitting; but this is far from an ideal option because it inevitably leads to certain students working with the same other students over the course of the semester.

You gave each pair approximately twenty minutes to complete a short exercise centered around developing a news segment. For the first five minutes of the exercise, you stood back, remaining at the front of the room, and let the students discuss amongst themselves. Then, for the remaining fifteen minutes of the exercise, you and the professor circulated the room, providing tips and feedback to each of the pairs. I thought this was a particularly effective and nicely paced technique as it allowed students to formulate ideas on their own and *then* discuss them with either you or the professor. In my own teaching, I often feel like I'm stifling creativity when I insert myself into student groups or pairs, though I also recognize that it can be necessary to keep students on task.

At the twenty-minute mark, you gave students a "two-to-three-minute warning" to wrap up the exercise and you reconvened the class when they quieted down into a natural silence. Students then gave short presentations based on the exercise. Before each pair presented, you asked them to re-introduce themselves to the class. (Was this for their own benefit or yours? Certainly, you seemed to already know all of the students by name.) You responded encouragingly to each presentation and asked generative questions about the exercise. I noticed that, at first, you moved around the room, standing behind each pair while they were presenting; however, after about the second or third presentation, you moved back to the front of the room. I especially liked your initial approach (of standing behind the students) as it shifted the center of attention in the classroom to wherever the students were seated. Later, when you were standing at the front of the room, students' attention was split between you, the instructor at the front of the room, and the students who were presenting elsewhere in the room.

Finally, near the end of your lesson, you introduced the assignment for the week. In addition to laying out the criteria for the assignment, which involved shot sequencing, you did a great job reinforcing and reminding the students of useful concepts or "rules" in cinematography (e.g., "remember the 100- 80-degree rule!") while also recognizing that "rules are meant to be broken." This seemed a generous way of fulfilling your lesson plan while also adapting it to suit the more experimental interests of your class. You shared your own example of shot sequencing, which was met with applause from students. It looked like you might have had a second example on hand but that, in the interest of time, you decided not to show it.

Thank you so much for letting me observe your class! It was really inspiring to see you teach!

All my best,

Tye Landels
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