

Classroom Observation Response - Whitney Kane

Observer: Harrison Potter
Instructor: Whitney Kane
Time: 11:45am-1:00pm
Location: West Duke 204
No. of Students: 12
Course: Introduction to Philosophy - Ethics Focus

The syllabus makes it clear that one quarter of a student's grade is due to participation in classroom discussions and activities. I found this to be an intriguing approach to encouraging classroom attendance and participation. In the absence of regular quizzes or graded assignments this seems like a critically important feature of the course. Without it I expect that attendance would be terrible: students would reason that cramming for the logic exam and writing the two required essays that constitute the remainder of their course grade are tasks they could manage to complete without attending class regularly. I did not see you taking attendance and even with only 12 students I would think that ranking each student's participation following each lecture would be difficult or impossible. How do you manage this?

I mention this explicitly because all evidence points to your having established a good rapport with your students. In the 5 minutes preceding class there was an engaged discussion of weather, basketball, travel, and living in Africa. This small talk prior to class helps to establish a social atmosphere and relax students to the point that they will speak during class. I feel that this, along with the course attendance policy, forms an important platform from which the actual material of the course can be delivered effectively: both carrots and sticks are used to encourage classroom participation in a course that lives or dies by such active student engagement and classroom discussion.

An understanding of and manipulation of the social atmosphere in the classroom is something that I think is both important to your teaching and could be more consciously controlled. All students sat around a narrow table spanning the room, with your seat at one end of the table and an overhead projector behind you. Your position at the head of the table was a position of power and authority. I felt this, together with your relatively formal attire, served you well in establishing your control over the classroom and garnering respect and attention from your students. This is no small feat given the absence of a more formal lecture structure to the course, the absence of physical space separating and distinguishing you from your students, and the tendency of students to defer more easily to older and male instructors. I feel that you did an excellent job establishing yourself as the authority figure in the classroom.

I feel that there are ways in which you could further emphasize your authority in the classroom when the occasion calls for it: when you're taking students through the slides you prepared, for example. As you went through the slides you had prepared you spoke from a sitting position in your rolling chair, sometimes even rolling away from the table somewhat to point more closely at the screen, but without standing up. I don't recall if you went back to your laptop to change slides or whether you were changing slides from a distance using one of those presentation devices, but in either case you remained seated. An alternative approach that you could use would be to consciously break away from the table and your laptop when you had a 5 or 10 minute segment during which you needed to take the students through your slides. Stand up, push your chair in, and change slides using a presentation device. Then when you need to transition back to a more social dynamic you could do so more deliberately and clearly by sitting down, communicating it through body language, without saying a word. Students would read these signals and know intuitively what they were meant to be doing at any given moment, what the atmosphere of the classroom was.

As you were presenting your slides you also tended to read from the screen rather than from your laptop. This is a very natural thing to do, and certainly something that I do constantly during my own lectures as I'm writing on a chalkboard, but it is something that you don't actually need to do given your circumstances. By either printing off your slides ahead of time or by training yourself to read from your laptop screen rather than the overhead screen you could keep your shoulders squared to the class. This would naturally force you to focus on how the students are responding to you and keep you focused on engaging the students even as you are presenting the material, which is admittedly a difficult tightrope to walk.

Your tendency was to alternate between looking from the overhead screen to the class in an attempt to gauge student attentiveness. Although this demonstrated that you acknowledged the potential for student disengagement during these more formal presentation portions of the class this was in fact when students

became most aloof from the classroom discussion: they were doodling, staring at the wall, stretching, reading through other materials you had handed out, and so on, with relatively few students truly paying attention. A brilliant thing that you did for a certain segment of the class was that you gave students a handout with numerous blanks that they needed to fill in based upon your slides and the content you were presenting. For this particular portion of the lesson the students were almost universally paying attention and engaged: by giving them something to do with their hands, something specific, tangible, and digestible to do as they listened to you their attention snapped into focus. That worked wonderfully to enhance student attentiveness while you presented your slides.

When you went to the side white board to present some material the students were also far more attentive: you were more directly engaged with them, had better eye contact and were just physically closer to where all of the students were sitting. When the students paired up to go through a worksheet on Lewis Carroll there were two students who worked alone rather than pairing up. All of the students who were in pairs seemed to benefit from interacting and talking through the material, both expressing confusion and helping each other with the material. In order to ensure that all students benefit from such peer to peer interaction you could easily pair the students yourself, counting off around the table to make sure that everyone has a partner. This would again indirectly communicate to the students that you are, in fact, in charge and orchestrating the classroom dynamics for their benefit. Your responses to student questions as you walked around the room checking on groups were generally patient and helpful.

Overall I think that your greatest strength as a teacher and the area in which you have the most room for improvement is in connecting with students on a personal level, thereby enabling truly engaged and passionate classroom discussions. Moments of brilliance include your numerous wonderful and clever examples of logical arguments and fallacies, often drawn from advertisements and topics of current political interest, and the classic choice of a Lewis Carroll passage for use in a handout. Such excellent examples made possible a spontaneous passionate interjection by one of the students on the subtle differences between the definitions of agnostic, gnostic, atheistic, and theistic, for example. I don't think that you fully capitalize on this to get students speaking and learning the topics from your slides, though: you tend to speak quickly, perhaps out of nervousness, and this can make it difficult for students to follow at the pace you are going through material. For example, at 11:58am you began presenting a new logical implication and by 12:00pm you had moved on to something else entirely after asking "Right?", pausing a moment to the sound of silence, and then asking more deliberately "Any questions?", to which students again did not respond.

One of your great strengths as a teacher is your likeability, your cheeriness, and your energetic voice: you wave your hands as you speak, are facially expressive, and change the intonation of your voice. This is excellent: it gives you immediate draw and charisma as a speaker. If you can be just a little more deliberate about the pacing of your speaking and on addressing the audience at every moment of the entire class so that your mind is not on the material, over which your well-made slides and professional appearance help communicate your command, but rather on the students at every single instant of the class I think you can retain your naturally compelling speaking while improving your ability to effectively communicate the material you are teaching to your class.

Thank you for allowing me to observe your class. I think that you are an excellent teacher and I look forward to enlisting your support to improve my own teaching. Thanks again.

Instructor: Harrison Potter
Observer: Whitney Kane
Time: 8:45-9:35am
Location: West Duke 108B
Course: Laboratory Calculus II

First, I really enjoyed your class! One thing that really stood out to me from the start was how attentive your students were so early on a Monday morning, and I think that is a testament to your teaching abilities. You come across as cheerful, alert, and energetic, and I think that your energy was contagious. For instance, you made jokes throughout class (e.g. about inductors) that got them laughing. Students' attention sometimes starts to trail off at this point in the semester with final papers and exams just around the corner, but your students were all very attentive. You also did a nice job making it clear to your students that you cared about helping them understand the material. For example, you did pulse checks by asking your students questions like, "Before we move on, does anyone have any questions about what we've talked about so far?" You did not just assume that your students understood everything right away, and you made it easy for them to reach out for help if they were struggling with a certain idea/point without feeling dumb.

You also have strong presentation skills. You seemed very comfortable speaking in front of a large audience. Also, you explained ideas in a way that made them easy to comprehend, and you did not rush through your explanations. Further, you wrote everything on the board very clearly, which might seem like a trivial comment, but I think this is especially important in a math class. Many students learn how to do certain types of math problems by watching someone else work through a sample problem. If students can't read the sample problems, it is much more difficult for them to understand how to do those types of problems themselves. You also covered what seemed like a perfect amount of material for a single class period—you didn't try to do too much or too little, and as a result, my impression was that this kept your students feeling challenged, but not frustrated, by the difficulty of the material.

The whole-class problem-solving structure of your class was an effective way to keep students engaged, as you consistently elicited responses from your students. If that structure ever starts to feel redundant, you could incorporate a problem-solving element into other formats. For instance, you could start the class with a lesson and then have students break into small groups and use what they have just learned to solve a set of problems.

It seems like this would be helpful, not only because it would add variety to the class structure, but also because it would force each student to come up with more answers to the problems. When working on problems as a large group, there are more opportunities for someone else to come up with an answer first.

You could also incorporate problem solving into another format by adding a lighthearted competition to the class. For example, you could give small groups a problem and see who can solve it first for a small prize (for instance, Smarties candy, fun math-related prizes?). If you provided a number of opportunities for students to earn a reward, hopefully everyone would win eventually.

Also, you might consider instituting a hand raising policy in order to give you greater control over which students are responding to questions and how quickly they are responding. A handful of students were very eager to participate, and while it was great that they were so enthusiastic and willing to offer answers, this might have discouraged other students from participating, or it might not have given other students enough time to think through the problem themselves. A hand raising policy would allow you to pause for a moment after posing a question and give everyone a minute to think about the problem and come up with a solution. However, I did like that the lack of a hand raising policy seemed to make your students feel more comfortable and willing to answer questions—it felt less formal. If you would rather not have to call on students for every answer, another way to elicit feedback from a greater number of students would be to explicitly ask that someone who you haven't heard from answer the question. You could also ask that someone from a certain area of the room respond (e.g. the back of the room).

Overall, your class was terrific, and I really enjoyed sitting in on it. It was evident that you have had a lot of experience teaching!