

Jim Coby's Teaching Observation for Dr. Paul Cook
April 20, 2021

Before the Class:

Upon my agreeing to review his course, Dr. Cook added me to his course's Canvas shell. I saw the care with which he structured his class to make it accessible and appealing. Significantly, I received an email shortly after being added to the class (as did Dr. Cook's students) reminding them of an upcoming assignment deadline and the readings for the following week. While not wholly necessary, as we should assume students pay attention to this material on their own, Dr. Cook's email reminder served as an important outreach tool and one that signifies his involvement and appreciation for both the lives of his students outside of the classroom and their roles within it.

The Class:

I visited Dr. Cook's ENG-W 311 course on April 20, 2021. On this particular day the class was divided into four different components, each lasting approximately 20 minutes. The class began with a student presentation. Although Dr. Cook has prepared the computer space in case the student wanted to utilize technology, the student declined. Coupled with this, several students arrived just as class was beginning or slightly thereafter, leading to a marginally frenetic initial pacing. Once the student began her presentation, though, the pace calmed down. Throughout the student's presentation, Dr. Cook made encouraging remarks and asked for clarity when the student provided vague details or instructions for her peers. I found it significant that when the student posed questions about her research to the class, Dr. Cook echoed, "These are important questions." In providing this verbal feedback, Dr. Cook relieved some of the student's anxiety while also emphasizing the value of her questions.

As part of the presentation, students were asked to join small groups and discuss questions. Dr. Cook participated by joining a group and helping the students to synthesize thoughts without taking control of the group's ideas. While I would typically encourage a professor to spend time with each group, given that the student leading the presentation was in charge, my expectations for Dr. Cook's involvement with every group were muted. Following the groups work was a Q&A session with the student presenter. During this period, Dr. Cook asked provocative, but not overly difficult questions, and provided additional context when the presenter seemed lost. It was also during this period that the student presenter appeared most at-ease and articulate, genuinely excited about her newfound knowledge and the ability to share it.

Following the student presentation, Dr. Cook spent approximately 20 minutes reminding students of expectations for their final portfolios. During this lecture, Dr. Cook took advantage of classroom technologies by employing Canvas and whiteboard to emphasize important aspects of the portfolios. While all of the material presented seemed to be available to students on Canvas, it was necessary information, and I expect that students will benefit from consistent classroom reminders.

After students refreshed their memories about final portfolios they learned about the interviewing process. Dr. Cook is clearly interested in this subject, and his lecture became increasingly energetic and passionate about the material. Throughout the lecture, Dr. Cook outlined the ways in which students should conduct interviews, and spoke to some unconventional routes they should pursue. Specifically, Dr. Cook encouraged students to “allow [themselves] to follow up and go down rabbit holes” when the opportunity presented itself. Such advice will undoubtedly lead to more lively interview transcripts, while also making the process more appealing to both interlocutors. Given the sheer amount of material that needed to be covered, I thought Dr. Cook did a fine job. Should time allow in the future, Dr. Cook might consider beginning this lecture by asking students what their initial impressions and ideas on the chapter were and then build on their responses, filling in gaps and adding information when necessary.

Class concluded with an individual assignment during which Dr. Cook invited students to jot down potential interview subjects and begin thinking about what sorts of questions students might like to ask them. During this period, Dr. Cook sat at the front of the classroom, which allowed students to work on their own, but also made his presence known in the case any questions about the assignment arose.

Critiques:

What critiques I have of Dr. Cook’s instruction are limited and easily resolved. While students tended to vocalize ideas and concerns while in small groups, they were reticent to do so in the class more generally. This timidity could signal any number of issues beyond Dr. Cook’s control (student exhaustion, the late stage of the semester, etc.), but occasionally asking for directed feedback from an individual student could help diversify opinions in the classroom. Lastly, near the end of the class Dr. Cook provided students with a brief in-class assignment. When presenting this assignment Dr. Cook delivered his expectations orally, but did not write down the tasks on the whiteboard. The tasks themselves were not overly complicated nor onerous and should easily be remembered by students. Nevertheless, having tangible and easily viewable reminders of their expectations would benefit the students.

Summary:

Dr. Cook is clearly a skilled and passionate teacher. He has a strong rapport with his students, able to both joke around with them while also commanding respect. The class itself is varied enough to keep students’ attention, without becoming unruly or overwhelming. The utility of each assignment was clearly noted, and each activity scaffolded on ones before.

Jim Coby

April 26, 2021