

Observation Report: 11/14/18

This report was written by a trained graduate teaching consultant at Columbia University. It is strictly confidential and for formative purposes.

Basic Information

Instructor: Caroline Marris

Department: History

Date of Teaching Observation: 11/14/18

Course: Contemporary Civilizations

Attendance: ~20

Location: Hamilton 402

Teaching Consultant(s): Colin Raymond

Context

COURSE SUMMARY

- This is a Core course that is based around readings and discussion. The day's topic was a slight deviation from the main quasi-chronological course outline, and was aimed at providing students a deeper appreciation of the complexities of the Reformation. Students completed several readings in preparation and were led through a guided discussion followed by creating a comparative chart.

PRE-OBSERVATION MEETING SUMMARY

Learning goals for this particular class session identified by the instructor

- Provide additional content depth to round out students' understanding of the Reformation, but balance this with breadth in a way that reasonably corresponds to students' interests.
- Encourage quiet students to talk more -- certain of them have expressed personal difficulties about speaking, which the instructor has tried to be aware of and accommodate.

Aspects of teaching that the instructor is looking for particular feedback on

- While conversations are lively, the instructor is frequently heavily involved, through moderating or otherwise adding thoughts and information. Does this near-continuous involvement provide a helpful framework for the students, or is it stifling them, either by discouraging some students from speaking at all or by unconsciously steering those who do away from the topics that they find most interesting?
- Are all students truly understanding and appreciating the material, or is their enthusiastic participation masking major problems/misconceptions?

Observation

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Observation: You have a clear and direct communication style, with good energy, evident in your expository lecture to start the class as well as your deft handling of questions. The pace was somewhat rapid at times, although this was countered by circling back to the text in response to student comments that everyone may not have completely understood, allowing the class to follow along with the chain of thought. Modern historical and geographical context was regularly injected to helpful effect, helping alleviate any potential problems of the day's topic being perceived as overly narrow.

Feedback & Recommendations: While a rapid pace tends to make students focused (partly by fear of missing something), I wondered if they were truly able to keep up, and throughout the first ~20 minutes there were no opportunities to provide evidence one way or the other. Occasionally applying formative assessment techniques other than simple questions, such as asking follow-ups, having one-minute mini-discussions, or instructing students to write down their knowledge of or confidence about a topic, would be helpful in this vein. Such reflection, even brief, tends to elicit more novel ideas.

Observation: The first-half discussion had a significant gradient of talking frequency, with students closer to the instructor generally responding more often (a few of them ≥ 5 times), and the opposite corner being almost entirely silent. Almost all of this discussion was instructor-centered, with only one instance that I noted of a student responding directly to another's remark. The issue was epitomized by students turning to face the instructor even if seated close by, which unintentionally acts to exclude people along the outside walls. Some of the comments by the most frequent talkers, although insightful, seemed to be aimed more at demonstrating their understanding to the instructor rather than truly adding to the conversation. I noticed that quieter students were chosen among the ones actively volunteering, but this still left approximately one-third to one-half the class who did not speak at all.

Feedback & Recommendations: The discussion-guiding was highly effective at surfacing thoughtful ideas, but this active intellectual exploration was limited to a subset of the students. Such differences will always exist, but I would suggest that these disparities were larger than desirable. Mixing up the seating would be one solution; another would be slightly modifying your practices to give quiet people more opportunity or encouragement, such as by allowing them more than a few seconds to think — otherwise, the people who have the most immediate

thoughts or reactions will end up shaping the discussion and moving it in new directions. Your encouraging remarks (e.g. "This is complicated stuff" or "You may not know all the boxes") were indications that you were considering this problem, but the remedies were not fully implemented. Some other ideas include varying the question type, such as also asking bigger-picture questions that more directly prompt students to discuss with or respond to each other (rather than doing this at the end of the class), and in general soliciting multiple responses. All this would serve the goal of obtaining a broad cross-section of student understanding as well as generating a lively class discussion.

Observation: The discussion on differences between sects was enthusiastic, and a major contributor to its success seemed to be that the goals for it were clearly explicated. Most groups of students began talking immediately, though several (perhaps 4 or 5) mostly reviewed their notes and overall didn't really engage. There was only slight correlation between this and speaking frequency, so it may have been a personal-dynamics issue. Immediately following, filling in the chart as a class was a nice device for encouraging bite-size participation, not in a fluid-conversation way but in terms of the diversity of volunteers.

Feedback and Recommendations: Not being able to monitor the vitality of the small-group discussions was a drawback of what was otherwise an efficient use of time setting up the board. Moving around the room a bit -- both during the discussion as well as in the more-structured first half of the class -- is a simple strategy but often surprisingly effective at shaking things up. While I thought the chart was a helpful instructional tool, being sure to allow another minute or two for a short class summary would have been a valuable use of time, because as soon as anyone who's watching the clock starts packing up, everyone's minds start wandering.

SUMMARY AND NEXT STEPS

This course appears effective at sparking active discussions based on a variety of readings as well as personal experiences. Your energy pervades these discussions and keeps them moving along, contextualized, and focused on the most-important themes, but also inevitably results in an instructor-centric classroom atmosphere (as are more classrooms). Nonetheless, more (monitored) open-ended discussion or writing exercises could be a solution for allowing quieter students more time to share their thoughts as well as for surveying the class's understanding. An alternative modest change would be leveraging your central steering role to ask more follow-up questions or otherwise spur short discussions instead of effectively soliciting responses from the most talkative one-third to one-half of the class. With only a few exceptions, all students seemed on-task and motivated to learn the large majority of the time, so it would likely not be

too difficult to see positive change in the metrics you're interested in from the implementation of just a few changes in the framing.