

Observation of Yolande Brener  
English 101-0930: English Composition I  
Borough of Manhattan Community College  
October 4, 2019

Attendance: 20-30 students

Yolande started class with an immersive roleplay activity, where pairs of students pretended to be starting a protest club, and acted out a dialogue between each other. The purpose was to help them understanding how to develop reasons for an argument, including disagreeing/agreeing, and also to perceive an argument from multiple sides.

The student groups were incredible; they showed amazing acting, and the eyes of the rest of the class was mostly on them the whole time, listening with close interest. Later I asked Yolande about the activity. She told me she encourages them to perform, but doesn't actually force anyone to stand up and act ("I tell them to just read"), but somehow they all gather courage and end up liking it and pushing themselves to perform. She evolved this activity from noticing how they respond to arguments and the skills they still needed to practice, so Yolande clearly reflects heavily on how to design better and better exercises for her students.

After the roleplay activity, Yolande smoothly segued to arguments in *written* form.

Yolande: "Now, what other ways can you respond to a text, besides agreeing and disagreeing? You can use what our book calls a "quotation sandwich"—do we know what that is?"

Student (smiles): "I know what a *Subway* sandwich is."

Yolande runs with the student's joke. "Okay; what's inside one of those Subway sandwiches?" The student lists some ingredients, including bread. Yolande continued, "So for a quote, what would the "bread" be?" The student answered, "The knowledge?", Yolande confirmed his answer, and she continued with her projector presentation on how to quote to support your opinion. This was an excellent bridge to her lesson and it showed that she could easily adapt to a student's context.

The projector presentation continued. Just as I was thinking that the lecture part of her projector presentation was about to become too passive if it continued, she immediately moved to have them *practice* the onscreen concepts in their notebooks. This meant there was no more than 4 minutes of onscreen lecturing, which is good, and she even had a student reads some of that out; therefore, she expertly planned the projector presentation to be as active as possible.

Later on, she did another projector presentation, but rather than keeping it active by keeping it short, she kept it active through more advanced methods. She would lecture for a tiny amount of time, then challenge them to take a moment to correct some items on screen, which created engagement; and at one point, her item was so cleverly thought out that it functioned more like a *riddle*, which really upped the interest level and got them all excited; this was very well done.

At one point she asked a fascinating question about a Descartes quote on screen. But then her explanation was a little awkward—it involved giving the whole lengthy Descartes passage. It wasn't really clear what she wanted them to do them. Better would be to have the students paraphrase, even weakly, what Descartes is saying in the short version, then show them the whole passage to see the difference.

I like that she checks in with them repeatedly “Is this clear?”, and is good at sensing their hesitation, and asking them again. She also keeps asking them what they want to do next, or look at next, which really impressed me, and they were comfortable enough to suggest some directions. Later I asked her how does she account for all the directions that they might want to take the class? And she told me that she is flexible about the in-class conversations, even if she tries to guide it to the main issues. She has even noted to herself what her current or prior class seems most enthusiastic about, such as the subject of “food,” and then incorporates that subject into their writing assignments. In general, she strives to give her students agency over the content.

Later during our post-ob, Yolande told me she is very interested in making her classroom as active as possible, so I made a few advanced-level suggestions and we hypothesized a few others, such as asking students gamey questions to test their recall of key information they must remember for an upcoming project.

#### Syllabus

Her syllabus is very detailed and contains all required information.

#### Feedback on Student Work

In all papers, Yolande was precise, kind, explaining what she appreciated, what wasn't quite working, and wrote several paragraphs of macro-level comments.

#### Conclusion

From running roleplays to asking clever questions, Yolande is dedicated to making each moment of her classroom shine as actively and immersively as possible. One of my areas of specialization is in active learning exercises and games, yet I was still impressed by what Yolande had designed. She even showed me an outline for herself where she tries to map out every 5-10 minutes of the day in order to optimize her teaching and conduct a range of different activities. Overall, she is committed to constantly improving her teaching techniques, in order to deliver the best learning experience possible to her students.

This was a satisfactory observation.

Sincerely,

Prof. Joe Bisz  
Associate Professor, English Dept.