

Evaluation of Noor Ghazal Aswad's Teaching - COMM 2381: Oral Communication

March 13, 2019

Submitted by Prof. Antonio de Velasco – August 6, 2019

Narrative

From the start, Noor was interacting easily with the students in her class, well before the session was to begin at 12:40pm. Several were lined up, in fact, to ask questions about an assignment. She seemed totally poised and patient as she addressed each.

As she took attendance, it was clear that she'd already put names and faces together for each and every student. (It's also the case that she addressed students by names when they asked questions.) Once she completed taking attendance, Noor then distributed an "explanation sheet" that detailed at length and with precision the expectations and grading criteria for their coming assignment – a persuasive speech. That sheet seemed designed to address some earlier questions and perhaps misconceptions about the assignment. The students seemed focused as they looked it over.

Once this was out of the way, she then moved into a kind of "Round Robin" exercise in semi-extemporaneous public speaking. The students had obviously done this before. They seemed engaged (even joking with each other) as they each spoke for 30 seconds with one student keeping time. The exercise, which took about 15 minutes, had them using the last phrase of the previous student's "speech" to begin to make their own. So within minutes – and I think she does this nearly every session – the students had each already had a chance to do public speaking. Once this "warm up" was complete, she then turned to a review of the comments she received from students on their "mid-term evaluation" of the class. She displayed the comments, too. I thought this was effective, because, of course, it allowed for the class to reflect on what was going well, what needed improvement, etc. But, in addition, it also afforded space for Noor and students to have a collective discussion about public speaking as something more than a one-way performance; learning public speaking became, in this moment, a kind of collaborative experience that afforded space for many perspectives. Since the evaluation form provided space for "suggestions" she then used those to detail a few concrete actions that she and the class would take in response. This helped to give the students a sense of ownership and agency, as well as to hold Noor accountable.

From this, she then went through a concise summary of the previous lecture, which then turned into that day's lecture. As she reviewed various reasoning forms – inductive, deductive, analogical, etc. – and introduced various fallacies – slippery slope, hasty generalization, etc. – a range of students spoke. At one point, when she asked for examples of analogy, however, there was a long pause. But she remained patient, and the students eventually came through. Once the review/lecture was complete, Noor led an exercise that used two speeches from the film *The Great Debater* to task students with identifying the techniques and fallacies they had just learned. She was explicit in her instructions about the need to take notes as the speeches were played onscreen. Then, once the clips were done, she broke the students into groups for a 10-minute session. She gave the students a handout that contained both a transcription of the relevant speeches and a list of three discussion questions. As the students worked on the handout, she waited about five minutes before walking around the room to check on their progress. Once the 10 minutes was totally up, she then reconvened the class.

She remained at the front of the room, and used the white board to catalog the various techniques/fallacies the students identified. As they called them out, she then would take an opportunity to clarify, probe further, and elaborate for each group. This part of the session was free-flowing and worked mainly to give students the chance to kind of test their knowledge in a group setting. Once this exercise was complete, she previewed the next session, reminded them of an assignment that was due, and then dismissed the class on time.

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Evaluation and Summary

Noor's ease with her students, as well as the polished and well-organized lesson she prepared, stood out most to me. Students seemed both focused and relaxed in her presence. She explained key concepts with clarity and consistency. She'd put the students into a position where they felt welcome to ask questions and make comments. Moreover, she handled two somewhat "sensitive" textual examples extremely well. The scenes from *The Great Debaters* feature arguments that speak vividly to segregation as well as to the extreme violence of the Jim Crow South, including lynching. Given that more than a third of our institution's students are Black, and given that we are located firmly in the South, Noor's choice was appropriate, to be sure, but also risky. Her strength showed, however, as students "tested the waters" in their responses, and she reciprocated with both gentleness and good guidance. She listened intently and used the categories of reasoning forms and fallacies she'd introduced before to help students parse the texts both as formal examples of argument and as human claims embedded in history and culture. I was very impressed by that part.

A few things for improvement:

- Noor, along with most instructors in my experience, tends to remain too closely stuck to the computer at the front of the room (in this case, on the right) which can sometimes become monotonous, despite the quality of her ppts. I think she should find ways to circulate more effectively as she talks.
- I mentioned this to her already verbally, but I think that the section on fallacies needs a bit of work in terms of the examples she was using. They were, at times, confusing to me, and I think I have a good grasp of the literature on fallacies.
- Another common issue: Volume. This was a small room, and yet I did have some issue hearing from the back. I think this needs some consideration, too.

Overall, this was a very good class. It was just my first observation, however, and so I look forward to observing subsequent classes, too. That said, I expect to see similarly positive elements when I next have that opportunity.