

Evaluation of Noor Ghazal Aswad's Teaching - COMM 3330: Research Methods

March 1, 2021

Submitted by Prof. Antonio de Velasco –

Narrative

Given the pandemic, the session I observed today was conducted remotely via ZOOM. This was a course with both asynchronous and synchronous components, and the students had already been working on the material to be covered. It had been a little while since the class last convened. This seemed to create some issues both with attendance and with student readiness to participate. And yet Noor seemed unphased. She was enthusiastic about the material and was able to generate good class discussion.

The session weaved together several elements – focused student reflection on their own learning, general guidance on achieving key course objectives (e.g., crafting a research question, writing an annotated bibliography, identifying different research “paradigms”) and specific guidance on these objectives via the effective use of a range of examples, as well as lecture and discussion exercises. Noor was well-prepared to teach remotely. Her sound and lighting were excellent, she had no problems managing “breakout rooms” on ZOOM, and her visual presentation was sharp and focused.

She first drew the students out with a quick exercise that had each speak for at least 30 seconds. This served as a prelude to an exercise in which she surveyed students on their impressions of the course up to March 1, which was just at the mid-point in the semester. They were afforded a minute or so to address three general questions. Once the time was up, the students then offered their thoughts. At each turn, Noor was engaged with their comments and responsive to their perspectives. The students expressed some of the normal anxiety with identifying a good research topic, but mostly offered positive feedback. They seemed very comfortable expressing themselves in front of Noor, and to me that revealed a generally healthy course climate in which they'd been shown before that their voices mattered.

From this starting point, Noor moved to covering the essentials of crafting a research question. This was not entirely new material to them, but rather an extension of previous work they'd done. Indeed, as she began, Noor stressed the need for students to review the feedback she'd offered them on a previous assignment related to drafting a research question. This was not simply a “reminder” but also a chance for Noor to stress the interrelated nature of the assignments. As she put it “each assignment builds on the other.” In this way, she made explicit how attention to her feedback could help them improve and build their capacity to complete more difficult tasks down the line. As she worked through this part, Noor also zeroed in on a perennial challenge in this course: Learning how to conduct research centered directly on “communication” as a variable. In her general lesson to the class, she made this challenge a leitmotif, and then used several examples of RQs to offer some guidance on ones that were viable, and ones that were not. The students then went into small groups and reviewed six RQ examples with the charge that they evaluate them on their own, and come ready to discuss their findings when the breakout was over. Once they reconvened, Noor then coordinated a discussion in which students weighed the pros and cons of each example. All the while, she helped to steer the discussion towards the basic objective: What makes a RQ viable, and how can we, as researchers, find the right language in which to frame our inquiry? She closed with additional examples of strong RQs from past students in the course.

After reviewing the basic components of an annotated bibliography and demonstrating how to use a key COMM journal database, Noor then moved to reviewing three major research paradigms and querying the students on what they'd already read on each. This culminated in another breakout session in which students were asked to evaluate a recent essay from a Communication Studies journal, and then to discuss which of the paradigms it belonged to – and why. Once the students reconvened, Noor was then able to use their relatively

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inchoate responses to provide more explicit guidance on the different paradigms; in effect, she was able to draw out from their responses to a specific article the resources to help them understand the broader lesson about paradigms.

The session finished with a preview of coming assignments and tasks, and further reassurance from Noor about her availability via email and ZOOM for one-on-one help.

Evaluation and Summary

This is the second time I've observed Noor's teaching. As with my previous evaluation, I found her preparation to be exemplary. She's as polished of an instructor as you will find. Too, like last time, Noor seems able to put students at ease, while still demanding a lot from them and maintaining rigor. What stood out this time, however, was that Noor was dealing with more dense material (research methods not public speaking) and remotely rather than in person. And yet, these differences did not diminish the quality of her instruction in the slightest. It should go without saying: Trusting a doctoral student with an advanced research methods course displays the confidence our department had in Noor's ability to give excellent instruction to our undergraduates. My observation confirms that this confidence was well-placed, and I very much look forward to observing Noor again in the future.