

Peer Classroom Observation Report

Faculty: Jessica McCaughey

Observer: Zachary Wolfe

Course and Section: UW 1020. M61 (Topic: Please Like Us: Selling with Social Media)

Place/Date/Time: Ames B205; 9/13/17; 2:30-3:45 p.m.

Number of Students Present: 17 (of 17 enrolled)

1. Describe the method(s) of instruction, including detailed descriptions of the different classroom activities.

This class was taking place a few days after the students received their first major writing assignment and—as Prof. McCaughey mentioned to me before class and, in slightly different words, explained to students to help frame the start of the class—was focused on highlighting the importance of being attentive to audience and recognizing that a “successful appeal or argument” required careful attention to the context. The activities included watching and briefly discussing a video, working in groups, and offering short group presentations.

The class began by complicating the idea of “selling.” Prof. McCaughey referred to the various approaches students are developing toward the assignment, with ideas ranging from selling charities to selling news. Today was to focus on the idea of selling the National Gallery of Art. Prof. McCaughey showed a short video from the School of Life, “What is Art For?” and discussed how it was related to the focus of the class. The students discussed the video briefly, and it struck me as particularly useful when Prof. McCaughey highlighted how students were noting layers and nuances in describing the video. For example, she emphasized that students were not just identifying aspects of the video as an emotional appeal or “pathos,” but identifying for what kind of audience the appeal could be effective. This was a helpful way of showing students how to take a step beyond the sort of category-identifying that they learned in high school.

The class then moved on to group work. Each of the four groups were to be a different social media team for the National Gallery of Art, tasked with drawing in visitors from their assigned demographic (DC young professionals, Boy Scouts, senior citizens on a bus tour, or high school students).

All groups immediately began researching social media outreach from the NGA and other museums and discussing what they found. Although early in the semester, the students were obviously comfortable both with each other and with getting on social media for a specific purpose (and not as a distraction). I was impressed with how focused they were and how readily they began analyzing the posts in terms of rhetoric, audience, and other frameworks and language they had been learning from scholarly materials examined earlier in the term.

Prof. McCaughey circulated among the groups, offering helpful guidance and critical questions but allowing the conversations to remain student-led. She then invited each group to come to the front and present their “post.”

Each group had selected a platform and composed an appropriate post for their demographic. The group targeting DC young professionals selected Twitter and explained why they believed that would be most effective for this demographic, which they described as college educated 20-somethings and 30-somethings who are politically active and career-focused. They had several posts, including a “munch n learn” headline promoting brunch and another with a photo of a couple holding hands in front of a painting, captioned “Maybe they like art too :)” that they picked to specifically target singles in their demographic.

The group targeting the Boy Scouts selected Instagram because that was most popular among younger people. They found a photo of a map of the US created by TV sets (Nam June Paik’s *Electronic Superhighway*), which they thought might appeal to Boy Scouts and to which they added “can you name all 50 states?” because, they said, groups likes to test themselves.

For the seniors on a bus tour, the group explained that they selected Facebook “because that’s the only social media any of our grandparents have.” They suspected that seniors who can afford a bus tour are likely middle class, which means educated and likely already somewhat sophisticated about art. However, they suspected they would be touring DC for other reasons and not thinking about art as something to experience while here. They offered one post with art from the 1960s and captioned it “step back into the ‘60s” to highlight issues that were personal to them and might be seen as part of the “history” they came to DC to experience. Another post advertised a chance to “experience art from around the world in 60 minutes,” which they thought would appeal both to people pressed for time with a full tourist agenda as well as people with limited mobility.

Finally, the group targeting high school students suspected they would not think of art as “cool” but would probably be relatively local and always looking free and easily accessible things to do. They created an Instagram post that was “from” a teen with a photo of him in front of a Rothko painting, captioned “Just got back. Super lit.”

2. What writing and/or research goals did the class work towards? Did the level of challenge seem appropriate?

For each group, Prof. McCaughey asked pointed question about why they made the specific choices they did. The students responded thoughtfully, often with very good reasons and occasionally with ideas for how they might have done something different. At the end, she advised them to ask themselves similar tough questions (“Why this language? Why this image?”) whenever they are engaged in a writing task and specifically as they draft and revise their rhetorical analysis essay that had been assigned a few days previously.

The activity seemed an excellent way to get students thinking about specific choices in their writing by engaging with a familiar medium in a fun and creative way. It illustrated that they do know what it means to speak in a different voice in order to appeal to a specific audience, and that the sophisticated scholarly writing assignment they had received would require them to focus on those writing choices more critically and carefully.

3. Describe student participation. How many students participated? What kinds of questions did they ask? What was the nature of student participation? Were they engaged in critical inquiry?

Every student participated and there seemed to be a strong collegial relationship among the students and with the professor. From my observations, there was a very equitable sharing of the work within every group. I suspect the nature of the activity encouraged this, since every student was equally comfortable with social media but unpracticed in using it for such a specific pitch. It also reflected an excellent class dynamic that had been fostered in the early days of the semester.

4. What specific suggestions would you make for this or future classes?

This was an effective and enjoyable class, and I have little to suggest by way of improvement. It might be helpful to offer a little additional explanation of the relationship between this sort of writing and scholarly writing. Prof. McCaughey made some of those connections explicit during this class, and students certainly had their assignment in mind given the surrounding classes, but even more “connecting the dots” on the day-of can be helpful for some students. The activity itself, however, was an excellent example of creative use of class time to help students recognize important writing lessons. I appreciate the opportunity to observe.