Taylor Mills: Teaching Observation and Practice Reports

**Part 1: *Observation***

 For this assignment I taught for and observed PEER during our recitation sections for IAH 207. Since we taught at the same time during the semester we were able to combine our sections, which presented a new challenge of a classroom doubled in size, but an exciting opportunity to handle more students and students we with whom we had not yet taught. The focus of PEER’S section that week was to allow students to ask questions and gain clarity on the novel *Passing* by Nella Larson, as well as the previous week’s articles that dealt with modern race relations and the provocative notion of being “transracial” in comparison to “transgender.” PEER stated that she aimed to spend some time clarifying and most of the time leading students into a discussion about these concepts, their opinions on the matter, and their applications to their lives as students in the class and as unique individuals in general.

 Observing PEER, she appeared to use limited guidance, seeking to keep the floor as open as possible for lingering questions. She began class asking generally if anyone had questions about the readings. To be fair, these sections are really early in the morning, but nonetheless there was no response. Her response to this was to then have students take a few minutes, think on their own, and write down a question. Next she had students turn to a partner to share their question and discuss together. After a few minutes she brought the class back together and again invited questions. This time she had a few students ask questions. PEER did a great job of restating the questions that were asked, responding, and turning them into follow up questions to facilitate further conversation. At times she addressed questions with more questions, giving students the chance to discuss with each other. At other times she addressed questions head on. The concept of “transracial” compared to “transgender” was complicated and one on which PEER ended up delivering a brief but effective lecture, explaining how gender is a social construct, and so is race. She presented herself as knowledgeable but not overbearing.

 My feedback for PEER involves serious praise at her ability to navigate between explanation/lecturing and facilitating conversation. When she asked a question and there were no responses, she was able to rephrase, reframe, or further specify the question until someone did engage. This is a pedagogical skill not specifically attached to a deep understanding of the material, but rather of how to ask the right questions to prompt discussion. She proved adaptable and flexible, like having students enact the “think-pair-share” activity of thinking of a question, pairing up with some to discuss, and then sharing as a class.

 Ways in which I think PEER could improve are to provide more structure. Even just having a few preselected questions or questions accompanied by sections of the assigned readings can give students something concrete to address, focus their ideas, and serve as a launchpad for deeper discussion. Providing initial specific questions does not limit conversation to those topics, but can instead give students scaffolding to lead into discussion that may diverge from the initial prompts. This can also help shy students share their ideas by first answering a specific question before sharing their own ideas and questions.

 Overall it was a great experience watching PEER and I learned a good deal about how to take small questions from students into more questions and discussion from this observation.

**Part 2: *Practice***

 When preparing for my lecture, I first considered the learning outcomes I had hoped the students would obtain by the end of the section. I find that by starting here, I am able to work backwards through how I want the students to come to learning the material, much like constructing an argument around a conclusion to which I am committed and seeking to convince others to accept. The learning outcomes I had for my students in this recitation were as follows:

1. Recognize the complexities of the concept of *passing* in the context of race and identity.
2. Identify aspects of main characters’ relationships with *passing.*
3. Have a deeper understanding of US history’s race and gender relations at the time of the setting of Larson’s novel *Passing.*
4. Practice basic literary analysis and close reading skills.
5. Gain a basic understanding of the novel.

I selected these outcomes firstly because I think it is important to have students synthesize across class materials to see how individual texts fit into the big picture of the class as a whole. Thus, the first and third outcomes pushes students to consider the focus of the entire course (IAH 207 Literature, Cultures, Identities: Ideas of Race and Identity). The second and fifth outcomes deal more directly with the text itself and reflects the need for students to understand the specific text for that week on its own. Additionally, this outcome and the final outcome both represent skill-building, an aspect of teaching, especially for an IAH course, that I think is especially important. Of all the readings assigned this semester in PHL 801, Lisa Delpit’s “Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator” stuck with me most. Not only are IAH sections comprised of a diverse student body, but also many of them are freshman, new to college and possibly coming from inadequate high school backgrounds. While Delpit was focusing especially on the relevance of race and teaching (and I certainly hope I am not extracting and misconstruing her work), I do feel the tension between teaching students the skills to get what they need out of the institution, and focusing on ideas, passion, abstractions and so on. Thus, I try to strike a balance between some skill-building and unpacking big ideas to make relevant to one’s own life.

 In order to achieve these learning outcomes, I structured the section as follows: after some general introductions, asking what the students thought of the novel and explaining the game plan for the day, I had students form groups. In a class of thirty students, I ask for 5 groups of six students each. In a class of sixty students as was the case for this section, I asked for 8 groups of seven-eight students each. Once formed, I let groups pick as a first-come-first-serve basis for which “character” they were to focus on. The options included Irene Redfield, Clare Kendry, Brian Redfield, John Bellew, Gertrude Martin, the setting of the book, i.e., 1925-1928, and the main plot of the book broken into the first half and the second half of the book. For the groups with characters I asked them to work as a group to answer a series of questions: 1) who is this character? 2) what are 3-5 key *personality* traits of this character? 3) what does this character think about the concept of *passing*? and 4) as literary analysts might ask, what could the author be trying to say about *passing* through the thoughts and experiences of this character? The first two questions address the second and fifth learning outcomes; the third and fourth questions address the first and fourth learning outcomes. For the group working on the setting, I ask them to list and describe four main events, movements, policies or issues going on around 1925-1928, as well as answering what race relations were like at this time and what gender relations are like at this time. This group’s work opens the door to addressing the third learning outcome.

 Given that the section was only 50 minutes long, I gave groups 15 minutes to work together on their topic. Once groups were finished I had them share their answers, ask follow-up questions, and further explain certain aspects in “mini-lectures” to make sure that all of the important aspects of each topic were mentioned. I then opened the floor up to any questions or follow-up comments from the rest of class at the end of each group’s “presentation” and engagement.

 In my opinion I think the class went well. Students were engaged and had them talking to each other groups, but not for an entire class. They brought up important aspects of the book, asked good questions, and demonstrated near complete comprehension. I was able to clarify points and suggest alternative interpretations to help students think critically while still taking away the main ideas from the novel. The one drawback I felt was timing. Though we finished everything with exactly one minute to spare, the last group was certainly rushed which didn’t allow for as much of a rich discussion. If I were to teach this model again I might have slightly bigger groups and scratch the main plot groups so that there would be more time to discuss the characters and setting, leaving the plot to them to make sure they understood.

 PEER’s feedback critique was exactly that, to make sure the allow adequate time, quality over quantity. I definitely struggle with this. Otherwise she felt the section went incredibly well and was impressed with my ability to glean rich discussion and understanding without having to personally present much information. I do try to have the students teach themselves as much as possible, and she picked up on this. PEER also mentioned that she had never seen group work function well, remarking that she appreciated the structing of group time with specific guided questions that were focused enough to dig into but not too specific as to narrow the possibilities for discussion by just “looking for the right answer.”

 Overall it was a valuable experience and I appreciated both PEER’s feedback and the chance to adapt to a larger classroom with this material.