

November 27, 2011

Re: Teaching Observation

On November 14, I observed Kimberly Casteline's class, "Religion and Media" in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University. This is a small class of only 10 students, and the atmosphere that has clearly been established by this point in the semester is one of intimacy, engaged discussion, and a high degree of mutual respect for the opinions of others. The students all know each other's names and use them in discussion. The small group setting also seems to make the students feel more accountable for the material. They had obviously read the assigned articles closely, and came to class eager to discuss them. Eight out of the ten students present spoke frequently (perhaps some strategy can be devised to bring the other two into the conversation?)

This class focused on two research articles on fan communities of the Grateful Dead and Elvis Presley, and considered whether their practices could be considered religious. The conversation took hold quickly, and the students were very comfortable voicing their opinions. The class was fairly unstructured, but the students were more than able to carry the weight of the material. Where possible, it might be a good idea to link topics to preceding ones in order to make the overall context of the discussions clearer. Near the end of the class a student gave a presentation on the recent British royal wedding, and ten minutes of discussion and feedback from the class and the instructor followed. The topic of religion was not as central to the discussion as I would have expected, but I am hoping this was an anomalous case. Overall, this was an extraordinarily collegial class and the instructor should be commended for creating such a hospitable space for the exchange of ideas.

Sincerely,

