

What is the rhetoric of humanism? What is the human condition? In what ways are tendencies/characteristics of being human used as points of rhetorical analysis and appeal? These are all questions that Katherine Nesbit asks her students to consider.

I observed Kate's Rhetoric 1030 class on February 17th for the duration of the period (approximately fifty minutes). This is a General Education, speaking and writing composition course, which focuses on skills related to critical thinking, inquiry, researched essay writing, and public speaking. Students practice forming persuasive arguments by considering the relationship between context, speaker, audience, and message. [Insert teaching goals here?]

I met with Kate just prior to the observation, where she briefed me on her specific teaching goals and agenda for the day. She would be showing two clips from the documentary *Blackfish* and her students would be coming to class prepared to discuss their first reading assignment from the graphic novel *Maus*. Kate explained that this would be the first day with this new text. The discussion would focus primarily on the rhetoric of humanism, and would then move into a more in-depth conversation about *Maus*—its surrounding history, the technique of storytelling, stylistic choices, the graphic novel platform, etc.

Kate's classes begin with a question—not a question related to a reading assignment or analysis, just a simple question that opens up communication between teacher/student, and encourages participation. The question this particular day was "What is your favorite smell?" The students seemed amused and lighthearted, eagerly sharing their responses. Kate heard from and spoke to each student in the semi-circle of desks, fourteen (plus myself) in total. This daily activity says a lot about Kate's teaching persona—she is enthusiastic, engaged, and creates opportunities to build trust with her students.

With such a culturally diverse class—there are [X] international students—Kate understands the importance of creating a classroom environment where all students feel supported and included. This is evident in the ways she conducts discussions, and the kinds of questions she uses for investigation. For example, the central question for this particular day's discussion, "What does it mean to be human?" is not a limiting one, nor does it point to a specific *right* or *wrong* answer. It is one that asks students to draw from multiple sources—experience, culture, educational background—and one that values all possible perspectives.

Before jumping into the larger discussion about the rhetoric of humanism, Kate did a brief "check-in" with her students regarding their experience with the new text, *Maus*. She asked them questions such as: "how long did it take you to read?" and "what were some of your reactions?" She then asked a couple of more specific questions that would help contextualize the central arguments and guide students in their reading of this graphic novel as a rhetorical text: "What is this Holocaust?" and "How are various people represented in the text, and why?" All of these preliminary discussions

demonstrate Kate's attention to the learning process/experience, and her support for her students as they engage with (sometimes difficult) materials.

To bridge the gap between the two pieces of rhetoric that we were dealing with that day (*Maus* and *Blackfish*) Kate asked her students to do a "free write" in response to the question "What does it mean to be human?"—giving them the chance to jot down their associations, and be prepared to speak about their thoughts. This, too, was an act of support in the sense that Kate's students were given time to prepare an answer they could feel confident sharing with the class. Kate went around the circle, multiple times, hearing from each student and documenting his or her responses on the white board.

By the end of the discussion, we had accumulated quite a list of ideas, and were thus well prepared for the kind of analysis that the next exercise would necessitate. Kate showed two clips from *Blackfish*, and asked students to consider how the category of "human" can be used as a site of rhetorical appeal and persuasion. Before she showed the clips, she asked if any of her students had seen the film, and if they could speak to it. One student willingly shared her brief summary and analysis, so as to contextualize the clips within the film as a whole. Handing the "power" over to a student, in this situation, is another example of the kind of dialectical teaching philosophy that Kate brings to the classroom.

Kate's ability to draw connections not just between various exercises on a given day, but between various texts and materials from different points in the semester, means she is thorough, prepared, and has great command of her subject matter. It demonstrates her attention to the arc of her course. After her students identified the ways in which the film portrayed killer whales as a representation of human characteristics and social patterns, and how this appealed to emotions, Kate asked her students to compare these rhetorical appeals to those in a previous text they read: *Whistling Vivaldi*, as well as their new text *Maus*. Her students were able to draw similarities and difference in argumentation and theme among the various materials.

Finally, Kate ended class with a more in-depth discussion of *Maus*, where she projected a PowerPoint with visuals, main points, and questions to consider and fuel conversation. Kate's use of the various technologies available to her in the classroom keeps her students engaged throughout the period.

I admire the ways that Kate is able to balance the role of authority figure with the role of enthusiastic participant—it is clear that while her students view her as a leader and source of knowledge, they also value the kind of dialectical communication that she fosters in her classroom. The students in Kate's class were willing to participate, from start to finish, and many of her students went above and beyond the questions they were asked. They value her class, and their own learning, and they are really lucky to have Kate as a guide.