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Observation Report: Allan Strouse

English 334

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It was an absolute pleasure observing Mr. Strouse’s class today. He is a terrific teacher, able to help students think through quite challenging materials: *Beowulf*, the manuscript, early 20th century German theories, and more recent analyses and arguments. Activities were not only appropriately varied – thereby keeping attention close and energy high – but also, by bringing together visual, aural, literary, textual, paleographic, and historical issues, enabled students to fully understand the complexity of the endeavor on have embarked. Moving easily through different pedagogical modes – Socratic Q&A, discussion and debate, close reading, historical contextualization – Mr. Strouse has the knack of bringing the class along with him; they’re obviously ready and willing to ask and answer hard questions and contend with difficult materials. In fact, they are eager to rise to the occasions he presents.

The lesson was a continuation of what is clearly an ongoing discussion of prosody, as presented by different experts in the field. “What’s the problem with this presentation of the meter in the poem?” “Where does melody come from?” – which rather than being a “dumb” question in fact led through (literally) marching through some ancient and modern lyrics to one of those mini-epiphanies we all wish would happen in every class session: “Aha! poetic *feet*!” The topics ranged widely: “What’s the difference between prose and poetry in OE, for instance, in Aelfric’s “Life of St. Edmund”? And how do we decide?” “Why does this scholar want to ascribe a later date to *Beowulf*, and why might others argue the opposite?” “What evidence is there in the poem?” “Why is it important to study the physical manuscript itself?” “How can we apply all of this to *Beowulf*?”

Mr. Strouse created an atmosphere where every student could comfortably contribute – and even more, to using their own expertise (e.g., the Germanists translated an untranslated German text) to do so. He expects one-page written (hard copy) responses at every class meeting, which keeps everyone up to date and prepared to add to thoughtful discussions. The shyer students were encouraged to speak as well so that by the end of the class session every student was heard. Mr. Strouse also uses a variety of materials very effectively, again getting students to actively engage with the texts they’ve read or are viewing. In fact, students leapt at the chance to read dialects, modern and Anglo-Saxon with verve. And importantly, when students presented alternate views to Mr. Strouse’s own theories, he was able to truly consider them: the class not only was asked to think themselves but they saw a teacher actually thinking too! They saw the process and heard the results. This was, by any measure, a significant intellectual occasion.

Mr. Strouse closed the class by reminding students of the next assignments, as well as of the work that should be done over Spring Break. He arranged with students for the next set of reading group hours. And students handed in their daily responses.

This is a very favorable report.