

Observation of Professor Kathryn Kurtz
Composition 294: Creative Nonfiction
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I observed Prof. Kathryn Kurtz's class in Creative Nonfiction on November 14, 2002; the class lasted about 2 ½ hours. From a pedagogical standpoint, the class was a model presentation primarily because Prof. Kurtz came armed with careful and thorough preparation. She also kept the class moving with an admirable mix of different activities. And she varied those activities with imagination and sensitivity to the emotional climate of the class. The class was from the outset a student-centered one. She kept her comments and directions short, lucid, and pointed. But what stood out above all was her thoughtful treatment—her kindness and consideration, even—of her students and their opinions. It was obvious immediately that she had created an atmosphere in which her students felt comfortable expressing their opinions on the assigned writings and on the writings of their fellow students, an atmosphere that enabled them to offer their evaluation in an open, humane manner. It was clear that the students were eager to hear their teacher's opinions and that they appreciated the way the class was structured and conducted. In short, there was no evidence of even the slightest suggestion of negativity; her comments and questions were aimed at supporting and encouraging each student to respond in an open and honest fashion.

The first part of the class consisted of students reading their written responses to their "Immersion" experience; that is, the several hours when they visited Wal-Mart as a class. Their assignment was to practice the various writing techniques they had discussed and practiced throughout the semester. I was enormously impressed by all of their "reports," though some were more detailed than others. Prof. Kurtz responded in very specific ways to each essay and similarly encouraged them to respond to their fellow students' work in benignly critical ways. She reminded them continuously of the major purpose of the assignment; that is, to use their essays as examples of what constituted authentic "creative" or "literary" nonfiction. She and her students constantly made careful distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, what appeared to be creative or literary nonfictional in their shared "immersion" experience at Wal-Mart. But what made their analysis so fruitful and relevant was that they used their own work as examples of what they were exemplifying and learning. I have rarely seen so impressive an instance of an instructor using her students' own work to embody the very process that they are simultaneously learning and practicing. How she integrated these seemingly diverse projects so effortlessly became the artistic and creative apex of the entire class.

After using the students' work as the discussion content of the class, she then read or had them read and discuss the assigned readings from several texts they had been asked to read. They concentrated on ferreting out the creative techniques of Eric Larson's *Isaac's Storm*, underscoring the way Larson uses specific details and embellishing them with his own sense of presentational accuracy in formulating a text. Using Larson's text as a jumping off point, she carefully interwove discussions of the techniques of Realism and Naturalism and the integration of storytelling and journalism as found in the students' and Larson's texts. She then related these discussions to issues in Kerrane's *The Art of Fact* and Ann Lamont's *Bird by Bird* in wonderfully encompassing and enlightening ways.

Most importantly, however, was the prevailing creative atmosphere that Prof. Kurtz engendered throughout the classroom; there was a joyous encouraging going on all the time that came from both the instructor and the students. The students were smiling and laughing throughout the class; they made me feel at home to such an extent that I chimed in during the discussion and felt free to share my opinion of their work. In fact, two students approached me after class and told me how much they enjoyed the class and praised Prof. Kurtz for her consistent encouragement during the semester. That highly charged atmosphere was palpable throughout my time in the class. It is an atmosphere that cannot be faked. It's either there or it isn't. Prof. Kurtz is an outstanding example of someone who is practicing the literal definition of the Latin root of the word education—"educere"; that is, to lead or draw out. And what she drew or lead out of her students was their own best selves.

Patricia Meadows