



October 31, 2018

Memo To: David Zonderman and William Kimler

From: Ross Bassett

Subject: Classroom Observation of Steve Lechner, History 254

I observed and evaluated Steve Lechner's History 254, Modern American History. The readings for the course consist of Eric Foner's text *Give Me Liberty* as well as a Foner edited primary source reader. The graded assignment for the course consists of a midterm and a final, two papers, reading responses, participation, and leading a class discussion. Steve requires each student to lead one class discussion and meets with the students the week before to help them prepare them for the class. The syllabus included all the required elements and laid out the course policies lucidly and sensibly. While this course obviously covers many discrete events in American history, Steve has clearly developed the course around main themes of democracy, citizenship, and freedom, which he emphasizes in the syllabus.

I sat in on Steve's History 254 class on Tuesday October 30, which met from 8:30 to 9:45 in WI 135. I arrived around 8:22 and Steve was already there interacting with the students and playing some music from the period being discussed (the 1940s and 1950s). It was clear that he had a good rapport with the students. He introduced me and gave me a name placard. (see below) As it was the day before Halloween, Steve distributed a bag of candy among the students. After announcements concerning future classes and assignments, Steve began with a short lecture on the CIA, discussing the long history of intelligence gathering in America, and how it was formalized into a permanent organization after World War II. He then mentioned how it came to have a more active role in attempting to influence or overthrow foreign governments. He threw off a number of ideas of how students could use these topics for a future paper. While most of the mini-lecture was delivered using Power Point, Steve also brought in an oral history of Truman's *Plain Speaking* (using the book as a prop) to discuss Truman's later reflections on the creation of the CIA. This was effective in demonstrating the variety of sources historians use and their strengths and weaknesses. (The oral histories were conducted many years after the events in question.)

Most of the class was devoted to a discussion of the days' reading, led by a student. The class circled the chairs. It was clear that the student was not an extrovert and not particularly comfortable leading class discussion. (Steve later told me that this student almost dropped the class over the requirement that each student lead a discussion.) In the syllabus Steve calls this part of the class "student-led instructor managed discussion" and that is what it was. The student was expected to (and did) carry the discussion throughout the class, with a set of prepared questions on the readings, but Steve maintained a presence, encouraging the leader, and bringing out the students' points. Among the items students discussed were the

formation of the United Nations and the way it was different from the League of Nations, as well as the Truman Doctrine, and the Marshall plan. The students were very actively engaged in the discussion, obviously having read the material. Of the fifteen students in the class, I would estimate that at least 12 participated in some way. Steve was particularly effective at redirecting or challenging incorrect or incomplete answers in a non-threatening way, by such expressions as "let me poke at that" or "not necessarily x." He also did a good job of reminding the students of larger course themes and the broader arc of history. While we are often aware of the offenses of the Soviet Union, Steve asked the students if the United States' actions in the 1940s and 1950s gave the Soviets any reasons to feel aggrieved, and the students provided a number of answers. One particularly effective learning experience occurred when Steve ask the students to act as historians and to give their views on when the Cold War began. The students gave a variety of answers, from the Red Scare of 1919, to the dropping of the atomic bomb, to the Yalta Conference.

Steve has created a remarkable intellectual community in this class. Steve has the students all use name placards so that during discussions they can address each other by name. (In my experience even if the instructor knows all the students' names, the students don't know each other, sometimes making the class interactions more impersonal.) While all of Steve's assignments are appropriate, I believe that some of them push the students beyond their comfort zone in a way that allows them to grow. He told me (and I am sure he told his students) that the ability to lead a discussion is a skill that will be important in many contexts in their future. It was clear to me that the students bought into Steve's philosophy.

This was among the most outstanding classes of any I have observed in my 17 years of observing courses, both by tenure-track and non-tenure-track instructors. I would strongly recommend that Steve be nominated for the Excellence in Graduate Teaching Award. If I have any concern about this course, it is that Steve clearly dedicates so much time to it beyond what would be any normal expectation, that he should be careful to insure that it does not take away from his dissertation work.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.