

## **Literature Teaching Fellow Observation Report**

**Teaching Fellow Name:** PAUL BLOM

**Faculty Observer Name & Title:** Professor Beverly Taylor

**Signature of Faculty Evaluator:**



**Course # and Name:** ENGL 123.3, Introduction to Fiction, Section 003

**Date, Time, & Location of Observation:** Monday, 18 November 2019, 1:25pm-2:15pm, Greenlaw 222

**Number of Students in Attendance:** 32 (34 enrolled)

**[Course Syllabus](#) and the [Day's Lesson Plan](#)**

### **Pedagogical Goals:**

The class was so excellent that my only recommendation is to work on engaging more students in the class-wide discussion. Paul did a fine job with the small groups, in which every student was prompted to contribute and prepared to do so by posting comments online prior to the class; these writings were the basis of group discussion. Fifteen of the 32 present participated voluntarily in the class-wide discussion. I think Paul might call on the quiet ones, especially early in the semester, to cultivate a habit of their talking in the group. (Even as I write this, I'm aware that I never call on the quiet ones, so I can't claim that I'm committed to my own recommendation.)

### **Class Comments and Evaluation (you may attach additional/separate documents):**

[Please include observations on the nature and extent of class interaction, class content, class organization, and instructor-student rapport,]

Paul Blom led an energetic, dynamic and highly productive class. After general announcements and a fun ice-breaker used throughout the semester (a student tells '2 truths and a lie' about herself/himself and the class guesses which is the falsehood), Blom broke the class into their usual randomized groups of 4-5 to discuss specific topics related to their reading for the day. The groups had been primed for this conversation by writing posts on their Sakai site the night before, addressing topics and questions Paul had designed to stimulate them to do close readings of a passage or take up larger topics such as trauma-based interpretation of their short story for the day, "Cryptozoology" by Kathleen McNamara.

Paul was extremely well prepared and organized. [On their Sakai site he had supplied students with a written plan for the day](#) that provided detailed directions for their discussion group activities as well as delineating upcoming activities for the last two class meetings of the semester including a workshop for

their final papers, and describing their homework (reading, postings to their class forum). With such an excellent roadmap defining their responsibilities, opportunities for extra credit, and what sorts of things they should be looking for as they read, students had no excuse for anything less than stellar accomplishment.

All this preparation paid off in a fast-paced and immensely interesting class discussion of the story for the day. Chosen from the latest issue of the *Carolina Quarterly* literary magazine, the tale was challenging in its topicality (involving the experience of a veteran recently returned from Afghanistan), its apparent uneventfulness (little plot), and its very subtle symbolism (multiple references to cryptozoological figures ranging from Big Foot to Santa Claus). The students were undaunted by the challenging story and revealed themselves to be extremely perceptive readers—obviously well trained to read critically and productively. They had learned lessons of the course so well that they weren't conscious they were developing a remarkably perceptive reading through their group conversation as they called out a long list of themes they found in the story. And their enjoyment was palpable, heightened by Paul's point that this newly published story had never before been studied in a class.

Throughout the class time Paul was a masterful maestro who guided discussion with tactful nudges and delicately formulated queries that allowed students to feel that they were actually directing the tune. He was a physically stirring presence, moving among the groups to help generate discussion, then recording a long list of themes on the board as students' ideas erupted almost too quickly to capture. Paul's writing on the board in a conspicuous slant nicely captured the sense that students' tumultuous overflow of ideas couldn't be constrained in a neatly aligned listing. Through it all, Paul kept up a ready commentary that invited students to make connections among topics and reminded them of relevant details in the story that developed their topics. In the midst of this excited medley of ideas and voices, Paul quick-wittedly acted out the concept of liminality by standing in the doorway, his physical illustration of the concept offering a memorably vivid material embodiment of the abstraction.

Because the general discussion was so rich, I may seem churlish in offering the single suggestion that I have for Paul to work on: since half the class remained silent during this group conversation, it might be helpful to call on the silent individuals, especially early in the semester to develop in them a habit of contributing.

In sum, this seems to have been an immensely successful course. The students obviously enjoy their work, and they have become extremely fine readers. Together they achieved a more comprehensive and subtle interpretation than I had come up with on my own. They have clearly learned a great deal about critical reading from Paul, and they have also developed a keen sense of the pleasure and profit to be had from reading fiction. A very successful class.

A postscript: Paul subsequently told me that in the next class meeting the students were able to pose questions to the author of the story, who appeared via Skype. The students found this experience really meaningful and asked very interesting, productive questions. This was a valuable climax to a rich learning experience and a clever culmination to Paul's course design.