



October 14, 2016

Re: Classroom observation of Simon Purdy

Dear Colleagues,

It was my pleasure to observe Dr. Simon Purdy in his course, *Principles of Sociology* (SOC 2000) for the 2016 fall semester. This observation was conducted at the request of the department chair in order to fulfill new contractual teaching observation requirements set out by the university.

I arrived several minutes before the class began, and Dr. Purdy was playing the song, “cult of personality” to introduce and illustrate the day’s topic(s), which included sociological conceptions of domination, authority, and bureaucracy. It was clear he was prepared and well organized before class. Being familiar with the day’s topic, which involved discussion of the thought of Max Weber and other foundational theorists, I was positioned to evaluate Dr. Purdy’s administration of course content and the way in which he communicates with students as an educator.

The students in the classroom (n=36) seemed engaged in the material. Dr. Purdy used a modern-traditional lecture model where he presented PowerPoint material covering main concepts. Some of the slides contained more material than is sometimes recommended, but he seemed to move through it at an appropriate pace for students. He was energetic and active throughout the class, which held the attention of students. His speaking and presentation style was coherent and informative, and he also interjected humor in an appropriate way.

He put several questions to students based on his examples that illustrated important concepts. Dr. Purdy incorporated current issues into the lecture throughout, and he used relevant picture/graphics to bring what can be dry, ponderous material (e.g. rational-instrumental bureaucratic processes) to life in interesting ways.

One suggestion I would offer is that Dr. Purdy allow more time, or push students a little more, on the questions he poses to them during class. For instance, after asking for examples of globalization, only a few seconds of silence went by before he filled in responses himself. Although, it is difficult not to feel rushed in a 50-minute class, as most instructors know, so I suspect this partly explains his moving on quickly.

As the class progressed, Dr. Purdy continued to cover a significant amount of material, but he did this in a balanced, informative way. I also noticed that he did not shy away from covering controversial topics during his lecture. For instance, he made several allusions to the current, highly charged U.S. presidential campaign as he discussed politics and bureaucracies as social institutions. He did this in a

fair, largely neutral way, neither committing himself to a particular viewpoint as he explored ideas, nor discouraging students who themselves offered controversial comments.

Toward the end of the class, he moved from lecture, to an in-class short response activity. He put the question to students, “What do you think U.S. politics will look like in 20 years?” Students had about 6 minutes to write their response, and they were encouraged to work together. This free-write activity helped to break up the lecture material and segued nicely to conclude the class. In the last four minutes of class, the students were asked to share their thoughts out loud, and about half a dozen students enthusiastically did so. They were engaged in the material and interested in offering their views, such that it was clear students feel comfortable in Dr. Purdy’s class.

In sum, Dr. Purdy’s teaching was thoughtful and engaging. He has created a productive learning environment where students can explore ideas, challenge themselves, and interact with each other in meaningful ways. Although I was only able to observe one short class of Simon’s, I feel confident that what I witnessed represents his teaching abilities generally. Undergraduate students, the sociology department, and the university at large benefit from his knowledge and the ways in which he brings this to bear in the classroom setting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jesse M. Smith". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the left.

Jesse M. Smith, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Sociology  
Department of Sociology  
Western Michigan University

Sincerely,

Jesse M. Smith

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