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Ed 262b: Formal Observation 3 (Hutchinson strategy)

Being in the STEP program has helped me understand the long process students and teachers alike go through in order to establish a safe classroom environment in which critical thinking can take place. Implementing a strategy modeled from Yvonne Hutchinson has given me the opportunity to measure where my students and I are in terms of creating that ideal classroom environment. Based on what I saw in the Hutchinson video, I decided to attempt a whole class discussion based on an excerpt from Sandra Cisneros' *Caramelo*. The title of the chapter we focused on is "Mexican and both sides," which deals with La' (the main character) struggle to find her niche within Davy Crockett high school in San Antonio, TX. This discussion was meant to evolve through the incremental use of more and more complicated questions. To scaffold this discussion, we spent an entire class period before the formal observation took place reviewing the different levels of questions (i.e. on the surface, under the surface, and life application) and having the students generate those different types of questions based on *Caramelo*. The discussion we had a couple of days later revolved around the questions the students posed earlier in the week.

Reflecting back on this discussion, I realize all the work that needs to be done in my classroom in order to create the environment I consider ideal. There were so many little details (from how to participate in the discussion to what to do when others are speaking) that I felt I needed to go over with my students to get them to begin to grasp the intricacies of having a whole class discussion. I wanted to make sure to inform the students of every step I was taking to complicate the discussion. I felt that by making them aware of how the discussion was progressing, they would better come to understand the process they need to take to improve their

critical thinking skills. Additionally, I employed the use of an observer (one of the most talkative students in the class) to help me carry across some main points to the rest of the class. I felt she provided an essential lens for my students to view the discussion with.

Early in the discussion I realized that a handful of students were simply not engaged with the "on the surface" questions and heard a great deal of unrelated cross talk amongst the students. I found that I had to work very hard to balance keeping the advanced students involved in the beginning parts of the conversation while at the same time ensuring my other students understood the basic events of the plot. Moreover, I was doing a great deal of translating between English and Spanish (we have eight non-English speakers in this class and although three were absent, their presence could not be ignored) throughout the hour and a half and realized how happy I will be once I give my students the ability to facilitate each other. I talked a lot during the discussion, which I suppose is fine for the first whole class discussion of the year, and had to work very hard to help my students make connections between each other's comments.

Facilitating a discussion between 22 fourteen year olds was very difficult, especially considering that a fourth of them did not really understand the primary language being spoken. I tried very hard not to get caught up in all the little things that went "wrong" (i.e. cross-talk, hardships in translating) because I knew we could review those things as a class and have the students themselves figure out how to deal with them. In the end, I realized that having the students reflect about what they had just experienced in the classroom and giving them a goal to reach- that of being able to facilitate themselves- were probably the best skills I could have given them in this lesson. I realize that there are many steps between where we are now and where we want to be, but for now, my goals are to better engage my students and not talk too much.

