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Letter of observation

Date of observation: October 13, 2021

Class observed: ART367, Film II

Faculty observed: Brian Fuller

Observation performed by: Charlotte Wellman

The stated objective of Fuller's Film II is an "increased emphasis on independent work and growth." Fuller led today's class of eleven students with the practiced air of an experienced instructor. All materials are on his website, which includes a detailed syllabus with the required subheadings and an itinerary to which he scrupulously adheres. Today's meeting entailed a "Q&A" dedicated to reviewing progress on each shoot, troubleshooting, and anticipating the next stage of production, the paper edit. Each team is shooting A and B rolls of a documentary with a stated purpose: one group is focusing on learning under COVID; another is focusing on Macedonian elders; a third is engaged in interviewing nursing staff about the deployment of medical mannequins. Fuller's "ice breaker" entailed jotting down things that had surprised them about the shoot: Most testified that the greatest ordeal was scheduling meetings with participants and cajoling them to consent to being filmed, rather than merely recorded. The real objective of this initial share was to troubleshoot challenges faced by teams, and Fuller achieved this by combining technical tips with his lived experience of balancing professional and family commitments. This strategy, which he uses consistently in all his classes, also gets every single student in his class to participate. The blend of technical know-how and vivid anecdotes clearly endears him to his students.

Proof of the clarity of Fuller's organization is that specific technical terminology and pedagogical shorthand becomes instantly clear to the casual visitor. He offers a brief discourse on an aspect of the documentary film-making. Today's homily addressed two types of approaches to documentary which he termed imposing or discovering a narrative; he made a clear pitch for the latter. Students responded enthusiastically when Fuller suggested that the most effective way to engage a subject was to invite them to tell a story and to keep questions open-ended, encouraging a process of mutual discovery.

Students were then invited to share samples of their footage. An A roll captures the major interaction between narrator and subject, and comprises two camera angles; a B roll is supporting material that can be incorporated into the final cut that adds variation and emphasis to the central narrative. So in an A roll we consider the nursing student performing the procedure on the dummy; the B roll references to grainy images of real and synthetic throats projected on paired, laptop screens resting on a neighboring table. Different camera angles, we learned, have to be shot in identical lighting conditions for effortless transitions in the final edit.

Of special note in Brian Fuller's materials and in his conversation with students is his strong moral center. This is clear in his language, as well, when he advocates for behavior that promotes and protects the integrity of relationships with collaborators and subjects. His syllabus, for example, contains a section entitled "Honesty and Ownership," where he calls for respect for "co-laborers" and for the protection of intellectual property.

Long class periods require deft shifts in topics and pacing to hold students' attention and engagement, and these strategies were gracefully negotiated in Fuller's classroom.