

## CLASSROOM OBSERVATION FOR SONIA FARMER

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On February 27, 2019, I observed Sonia Farmer's Book Design for Publishing class which is part of the University of Iowa Department of Interdisciplinary Studies. The class of 14 all-female students meets twice a week for an hour and 50 minutes. Most of the students, Sonia explained, are studying on the publishing track within the English program. Prior to the class, Sonia sent me the reading materials for that day and explained they would be discussing in groups the layout of their first spread. I noted that the material the class would cover was very technical, including terminology and concepts rarely discussed outside the practice of design and book-making. Though I was unable to stay the full hour and fifty minutes of the class, Sonia went on to use the classroom's available technology to discuss strategies for placing illustrations within texts. Sonia described the spread the students had prepared for that class the "fruition" of the all the lessons so far this semester.

The classroom was a computer lab, with rows of desktops facing together, which meant that throughout the class, students would roll on their office chairs from their workspaces to a central table where materials would be discussed as a group. As students trickled in, Sonia interacted with those who had already arrived at their workstations, looking over their spreads and answering questions. Once class was called to order, Sonia congratulated them on having completed their first spread of the semester and explained the plans for class. Before breaking off into "critique groups" where the students would discuss their work together, Sonia opened the floor to casual conversation about what the students experience during their process. "There's a lot of math," one student offered. Sonia agreed: there is math. "It's very temperamental," another noted." Sonia followed up with a previously established concept, micro vs. macro typography, which causes much of the difficulty. She then had the students take a few moments to think of their design as a whole. "Think of an adjective which describes the aesthetic you were going for." She explained they needn't have one right away, but to keep it in mind for their group discussions.

Since many of the students are in the English program, Sonia assumed some prior knowledge from them regarding workshop etiquette and constructive feedback, but she also took a few minutes to brainstorm good practices. Specificity and polite phraseology of criticisms were encouraged, while prescriptions and judgements were to be avoided. The students were reminded to offer the group the adjective they were going for in their design and to focus their discussion on the proportionality and balance of the work. With that, the students self-organized into their peer critique groups and Sonia invited me to "float" around the room with her while the students discussed each other's work. As we "floated," Sonia was careful to offer guidance and insight into the student-led discussions without dominating them. Often, she poised specific interpretive questions about the effect of a certain typeface, drop cap, or pull quote. Students offered up their adjectives, which included affects such as "industrial," "spacious" and interestingly "deformity." Students seemed encouraged and assisted by Sonia's contributions to their discourse.

Group discussion was where Sonia's evident skill as an instructor really shined: she was very comfortable interacting with her students and clearly had developed a warm rapport with them over the first half of the semester. I was impressed by her ability to bring her expertise in design and bookmaking to bear while maintaining a gentle and approachable energy. Her classroom was a space that felt very open, democratic, and not at all dominated by any one perspective, including her own. In this way, I got the sense that Sonia excels at cultivating a space which is predominately creative while offering structure and vital instruction.