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During the fall 2003 semester, I was a participant-observer in a section of Professor Michael P. Nolan’s TRS 105 Transitional Studies Fundamentals of Writing course. This course was one section of a learning community that linked students in two courses. The two courses consisted of two sections of TRS105, taught by Professor Nolan, and one section of CRJ 101 (Introduction to Criminal Justice,) taught by Professor Feasel. From what I could tell, the majority of the students were Criminal Justice majors, and thus shared certain career and life interests. I was allowed to observe and participate with the students as they formed a cohort and worked on projects that fulfilled requirements for both courses. I blended in with the student body by doing assigned readings and participating in class exercises and assignments. Due to scheduling conflict, I was unable to observe the participants in Professor Feasel’s course, so I would describe my experience of a learning community as a great introduction, but not a complete, objective experience.

In the classroom, I quickly noted Professor Nolan’s seasoned experience. Professor Nolan’s instructional style was that of a supportive expert instructor. He had an open and accepting classroom, with accessible, cooperative learning experiences. He always had a gentle manner, and supported students as they struggled to meet the requirements of college courses.

Professor Nolan’s materials and lectures were extensively developed. Materials included specialized handouts and worksheets samples of authentic student work, grammar points, and sentence structure. Professor Nolan’s lectures and notes were clear and targeted. He reinforced notetaking and various states of the writing process using a projector, and handwriting class notes using a variety of colors and organizational structures.

Professor Nolan’s assignments reflected the fact that he had analyzed the needs of Criminal Justice majors. Before the start of fall classes, he had taken on the responsibility of learning the content related to criminal justice. He had read current textbooks and research, analyzed civil service tests, and was in contact with Professor Feasel. He supported the students’ work in Professor Feasel’s course, and was a second expert for them to access. He helped students to understand the “why” behind the assignments and projects by providing them with specific reasons behind the creation of projects and assessments.

From speaking with Professor Nolan about future plans for learning communities at MCC-DCC, viewing the website and videodisk that he has produced, I know that he is a champion for learning communities. He has researched, documented, and presented on learning communities, together with his fellow learning community professors.

I make these statements as a participant-observer in his classroom, and having had a few meetings in his office. While I do not have extensive information regarding Professor Nolan’s work outside of the classroom, I believe that further investigation would reveal a mountain of supporting evidence of his commitment to student success.

I am grateful to Dr. Emeterio Otero for putting me in touch with Professor Nolan, and particularly grateful to Professor Nolan, who graciously allowed me to participate in his classroom as a participant-observer.