



12 November 2015

Observation of Katherine Dugan's class

On November 5th, 2015, I observed Kate Dugan's class on Catholicism in Chicago, an advanced undergraduate class with eighteen students, who sat seminar-style around a long table. My impression was that the class had developed a good sense of rapport with Dugan and with each other, which is partly because the material under discussion had engaged their shared interest, partly because they had gone through similar experience of ethnographic observation in Chicago Catholic churches, but mainly because Dugan's manner succeeded in giving them a shared sense of focus.

The assigned reading was material from a book by Mary Ellen Konieczny, *The Spirit's Tether*, on views of marriage in two Catholic parishes in Chicago. Dugan got the discussion started by giving background on three lay movements (the Catholic Worker, Call to Action, and Voice of the Faithful), then by reflecting on the "birth control encyclical" *Humanae vitae*. Discussion of these topics served as useful preparation for reflection on Konieczny's chapter and at the same time gave the students appropriate diversity of material. When she was covering *Humanae vitae* she presented essential background, had the students read key sections, had them break into small groups to discuss the material, then had open-ended discussion. She kept the class moving at a pace that was neither rushed nor sluggish. Part of the explanation for her success is that she had well thought out variety of techniques: she would give a mini-lecture, elicit student response, open the floor for free discussion of students' reactions, then shift to more specific questions, have the students do an exercise, have them discuss the exercise, read through material that supplemented the assigned readings, and so forth. She allowed students to use their laptops, and so far as I could tell the students all did so responsibly. At one point she had them log on to Canvas. She broke the class into groups of four, had them compare and contrast different aspects of what they had read about two Chicago parishes, then had them post their findings on Google Documents so everyone could see how the comparisons on different points added up to an overall comparison.

Her manner was consistently both professional and relaxed; she smiled and laughed quite a bit throughout the period, while keeping appropriate control over the discussion. Clearly the class as a whole respects her and is willing to accept her guidance; their appreciation for her and her input was clear from the large numbers of students who came up and spoke with her after class. Not all the undergraduates were equally engaged in discussion, but even those who were more quiet seemed to be attentive and interested in what was going on. She responded to and acknowledged students' contributions, in part by writing key terms on the board, giving focus to what they said.

It is worth noting that both of Dugan's classes in this fall term had held strong attraction for students: unlike several offerings in the department, they had healthy enrollment early in the process of registration. One reason for the appeal of this class, apart from Dugan's pedagogy, was no doubt the opportunity to combine classroom learning with exploration of the city at Northwestern's doorstep. Not only did the students get to see something of Chicago, and learn about nearby parishes--they also had the opportunity to learn some basic skills of ethnography. At more than one point in the class I attended, Dugan related the discussion to the ethnographic observation students have been doing in the parishes: she asked what they have observed that might indicate varying reactions to *Humanae vitae*, and she suggested how in future ethnographic observation the students could look for evidence of opinions and behaviors cited in the readings.

In short, this was a wonderfully successful class, and I expect the students will be eager to study further with Dugan.



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