

Jessica Gokhberg taught an intriguing, intellectually rigorous WRT 101 course in the Thompson Writing Program during the spring 2020 semester. Through the theme of “Stories of the US: The Bomb-911,” she engaged students in critical analysis of representations of international conflict and U.S. nationalism. More specifically, students examined multiple genres (including graphic novels, science fiction texts, and photographs) in considering the ethics involved in conflict as they relate to race, religion, gender, sexuality, and citizenship. Jessica fostered meaningful discussions via reflective writing in a variety of forms (drawing, alphabetic text, and origami) and utilized pedagogical methods such as small- and large-group discussion, peer review, and workshops.

Furthermore, she encouraged students’ cognitive and emotional responses to course material. For example, in the class I observed, Jessica presented two definitions of empathy—one from a dictionary and one from *Psychology Today*—and asked students to use the definitions to differentiate between empathy and sympathy. She then had students identify stakeholders in representations of emotions in images they had looked at for homework; Jessica created a mind map of students’ responses, consisting of victims in the tower (survivors and deceased), foreign governments, victims’ families, academics, American citizens, the American government, viewers elsewhere, American Muslims, Al-Qaeda, witnesses on the ground, friends/acquaintances, the post 9/11 generation, other terrorist groups, first responders, security states (TSA, CIA, FBI, etc), and artists. Students then discussed how stakeholders’ emotions motivate representations.

Finally, Jessica demonstrated a sophisticated sense of knowing when to push students’ thinking and when to give students more time and emotional space to prepare to wrestle with particular concepts. For example, during an exercise that asked students to generate a definition of “terrorism,” a couple students seemed unsettled by the notion that the United States’ dropping of the nuclear bomb was an act of terrorism. Jessica allowed the class debate to carry on while also re-directing the discussion back to concepts grounded in the reading (spectatorship, setting, and conjunction on different terms of the narrative). Jessica was noticeably accessible to students and conscientious in her course planning. Students were clearly invested in the course topic, connecting the material to their everyday lives and to the act of composing rhetorically. She created a relaxed yet challenging academic environment conducive to intellectual and personal growth.

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