



Classroom Observation of Bryan Abendschein

COM 1000: Communication and Community Engagement

April 2021

Summary

I had the pleasure to observe Dr. Bryan Abendschein's COM 1000 Communication and Community Engagement course taught during the spring semester of 2021. Due to the effects of the pandemic which required online course delivery, Dr. Abendschein's Teaching Observation, pursuant to Article 16:3:3 of the WMU/AAUP agreement was conducted through materials provided from his COM 1000 Elearning course shell. As such, Dr. Abendschein delivered his course in an asynchronous format, with recorded course content presentations, discussion boards, and online methods of assessment. In compliance with the language of the agreement, I was careful to limit the bulk of my review to the presentation of material relevant to a specific topic or topics (and not conduct a full review of his entire course).

Dr. Bryan Abendschein is an asset to the School of Communication. He is an excellent teacher in the online classroom environment—both in terms of his classroom management and presentation skills as well as the quality of the content which he covers in his class. It is my assessment that he demonstrates a high level of professional competence.

Class Content

Dr. Abendschein's syllabus and class schedule do a first-rate job of covering the content that we expect students in an introductory communication theory and praxis course to know in a systematic and thorough way. The material is up-to-date and reflects contemporary understanding of what is known about introductory communication studies. There is a challenging balance between not giving students too little material in the course nor giving them too much; he hits the mark just right. Furthermore, I would add that Dr. Abendschein's syllabus and schedule materials are clear, articulate appropriate course policies, identifies and previews required course assignments, as well as provides an explanation of his grading scheme.

In my review, I observed two lectures: Keys to Effective (Speech) Delivery and Family Communication—as well as a discussion board and an assignment overview.

It is my opinion that Prof. Abendschein did an excellent job in setting up his material on Keys to Effective Delivery. He began the lecture with a preview of the coming material as well as ended by reviewing what was covered. As to the specific content, he discussed the problem of communication apprehension (speech fright) and did so in a supportive way that gave multiple techniques that provided workable methods to assist students. His subsequent material on speech delivery: the style of presentation, paralinguistic dimensions (e.g., volume, pitch, rate), nonverbal components (e.g., eye contact, gestures) as well as visual aids were all covered with an appropriate level of detail in such a manner that was relevant to first year students at WMU.



On the topic of Family Communication Dr. Abendschein covered how families are defined, the nature of coupling, what makes for a “happy” marriage, and the different strategies of parenting. What stood out to me was that he did so in such a way that he made it clear that he was not generalizing, judging, or stereotyping but instead communicating in such a manner that students could use to understand and make sense of their family relationships. I also would add that the images he chose to highlight in his PowerPoint materials reflected the wide range of families (multi-ethnic, single parent, same sex, heterosexual, etc.) in a natural and matter-of-fact way.

Overall, as to Dr. Abendschein’s presentation of material, I was especially impressed that he was so well prepared that he did not need to refer to his notes as he went. Instead, he was able to be authoritative in coming across as *the* expert in the room—it left no doubt. From my perspective, Dr. Abendschein did not really find a situation in which he had to “think” about what he wanted to say. Instead, he came across in such a way that he demonstrated his personal mastery of the content. Said another way, the presentation of classroom material did not drag at all. All in all, I thought that there was a nice balance in the pace of the content delivery; he was able to manage the classroom time well.

Use of Technology

In terms of his recorded delivery, Dr. Abendschein presented his material in the form of PowerPoint slides with embedded, recorded video at the bottom of the screen. He was careful to do so in such a way that his personal “box” was large enough for students to see, follow, and relate to.

Dr. Abendschein’s use of PowerPoint was indeed competent. He utilized a common template with a “W” in the corner. He had a nice use of color and graphics. He also was knowledgeable and followed the “rules” of good graphic presentations. He also used multiple images throughout his presentational materials to create and maintain visual interest.

Classroom Management Skill

Instructor Delivery

Dr. Abendschein’s was credible and professional in appearance. He wore a dress shirt that presented himself as both credible and approachable.

Prof. Abendschein was careful to engage in excellent eye contact. He struck a nice balance between looking directly at the camera but also being careful to look to his left and right to communicate a naturalness and simulate the type of eye contact one would see in a physical classroom. He held his eye contact for an appropriate length of time and used it as a vehicle by which to keep students engaged.



He also demonstrated a good use of gestures and movement. He inhabited the space in an authoritative yet comfortable manner. He provided natural and timely gestures that made him easy to follow and helped to aid in making key points.

Dr. Abendschein's voice was nicely modulated and conversational in nature. I found that he demonstrated an effective use of pauses in terms of giving material time to sink in as well as providing students the opportunity to stay current with their note-taking. His pace was appropriate; his lecture did not drag.

I also found that Dr. Abendschein was helpful for students who had special needs. He did so in that he took the time to ensure that his material was formatted and presented with closed captioning assistance.

Classroom Management

In reviewing other additional course materials, I found that Dr. Abendschein engaged in positive classroom management. One item that especially stood out to me was that Dr. Abendschein utilized video to accompany the introduction of assignments to ensure that students properly understood his expectations. This is a significant improvement from those of us who simply develop them and present them in a written-only format.

Relatedly, I also reviewed a Discussion Board assignment directed by Dr. Abendschein. Discussion boards are critical in an online format, as they take the place of in-class discussions in traditional course delivery. Dr. Abendschein's discussion board prompt/question was thoughtfully conceived and designed to show the relevance of communication theory to applied contexts. His instructions were well-defined, and his method of assessment/grading rubric was clear. In reviewing selected student posts students demonstrated a solid understanding of the material and were able to make personal connections to their lives and experiences.

Suggestions

All in all, it is my opinion that Dr. Abendschein has no significant issues as it relates to his professional competence. The suggestions I have here are more in the realm of useful ideas that I have learned from teaching similar courses in the past.

First, I would recommend that Dr. Abendschein shorten his online lecture materials. His material on Keys to Effective Delivery was 30:25 minutes; his content on Family Communication was 23:58. What I would recommend is that he divide up these lectures into smaller sections that are 5-7 minutes in length, so that students can watch them in chunks when it is convenient for them.

Second, I would recommend that Dr. Abendschein add a statement to his syllabus about his commitment to student learning for all students and one that especially invites students who have learning disabilities, deal with anxiety or depression, or have special needs to reach out to him so he can work with them to accommodate their learning styles so that they can be effective.



Conclusion

All in all, in my review of his online instruction in COM 1000 Communication and Community engagement, it is my conclusion that Dr. Abendschein demonstrates effective Professional Competence. As demonstrated by the reviewed content, he is highly competent, professional, and an effective communicator of course content with a high commitment to student learning. The School of Communication is very fortunate to have him on our faculty.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Keith M. Hearit".

Keith Hearit, Professor
School of Communication