

To: Kenneth Sebastián León

From: Zaire Dinzey-Flores

Re: Guest lecture to Research Methods Class

On April 28, 2019 Professor Kenneth Sebastián León visited my Latino and Caribbean Studies Research Methods Class, as a guest lecturer. Here, I'd like to share my impressions of Professor León's presentation, teaching, and overall visit.

The Research Methods class in LCS is a 200-level course required for majors in LCS that aims to offer an introductory overview to interdisciplinary and ethnic studies methodology. The course covers a wide range of topics including developing a research question, examining relative literature, considering epistemology and its relation to methods, historical methods, art history, literature, qualitative social methods, and survey methodology. As a model the course includes a few visits from faculty in LCS who are using the relevant methods.

First, I want to comment on the willingness and even excitement that Professor León showed in visiting the class. In addition to an easy disposition for the topic, and excitement of interacting with students taking the class, Professor León expressed that visiting the course was a prime opportunity to gain first hand insight into a course that he would teach the following year.

I asked Professor León about conducting a guest lecture on interviewing, though Professor León's capacity to teach many of the themes and methods covered in the course should be noted. Professor León's visit was nothing short of a success. His presentation style is easy and structured, and he established an easy rapport with the students.

I admired how Professor León introduced himself in a way that demystified the common Professor-“holding all knowledge” vis-a-vis the student as empty vessel. Professor introduced himself showing pictures of his dogs, making himself accessible, a smart pedagogical move.

Professor León offered a masterful discussion of epistemology and the research enterprise. He was facile and clear, breaking down complex concepts such as epistemology and positioning the term historically and in its relevancy for ethnic studies, as well as for its application in research. One of his slides with an image of multiple vision points, was so perfect, that I often quote it when talking about research epistemology in other classes. His discussion of epistemology was so complex and nuanced that the whole class could have been focused on that topic. Unfortunately, the richness of the presentation at this juncture, left little time for a full engagement of the topic of interviewing. But even in a time crunch, Professor León introduced creative materials for rethinking the interview from a critical perspective. He played a video which was excellent to unpack the points of who is the interviewer and who is the interviewee, who asks and why, and how power is being negotiated in the context of an interview. Students responded favorably, and eagerly, to the conversation around the video. Professor León was able to ask questions that invited conversation and to ignite critical perspectives on how to conduct interviews. Once Professor León left, students commented on his brilliance. It is in his clear and detailed way by which Professor presents complex concepts that his pedagogical talents are most

evident. Additionally, he has a knack for selecting materials with which students can easily relate and he uses them effectively to elicit responses and healthy discussion.

If the presentation could have been improved, it would be for the oversized ambition considering the time frame. Professor Leon's extensive epistemological framing left little time to get to the practical side of interviewing. I suspect that this is a function of having come to a class in the middle of its course, where it may be unclear the basis of what the students have already covered. There is a balance to strike between complex materials and simplicity, theoretical and practical. The materials Professor Leon brought were so rich and merited more ample time for students to dialogue with them. Paring down of objectives for singular class sessions with more student-centered discussion would enhance Professor Leon's clear pedagogical talents. More interactive, hands-on activities could support the teaching objectives of classes such as research methods.

Even given the areas that I think Professor Leon may take into consideration for enhancing his future teaching, I already think him a talented instructor. Professor León is clearly a talented and knowledgeable scholar who has a facility for explaining sophisticated concepts and selecting pedagogical materials that serve well the learning enterprise. Furthermore, he has a firm dominion of the topics, is affable and pleasant and makes knowledge accessible to all students. I am grateful for his visit and his visit made our course better. I would be eager and delighted to host a visit from him anytime, as I found myself learning from his pedagogy, as well. Undoubtedly, Professor Leon is an asset to the Latino and Caribbean Studies department and I suspect his research methods class has been nothing short of a success.

November 28, 2020
Carlos Decena, Chair
Latino and Caribbean Studies Department

Dear Carlos,

I write to offer my comments on my observation of Dr. Kenneth Sebastian Leon's virtual class, LCS 312 (cross-listed with Criminal Justice Studies 389) Black and Brown Bodies and the Criminal Justice System via Zoom on Monday afternoon, November 16, 2019 from 3:30 pm to 4:30 pm. This was an optional synchronous session in what is mostly an asynchronous course. The total enrollment this semester is 24 (14 registered in LCS, 10 under CJS). There were 7 students present, and given the pandemic circumstances, this seemed to be a good number. It would be nice to incentivize more students to attend live lectures, of course. Leon records synchronous sessions and posts the recording and his PowerPoint slides on the course Canvas site, a good practice for students who find it difficult to attend synchronous sessions. As per the CTAAR review guidelines, I will comment on both course design and quality of teaching.

Professor Leon's syllabus has an appropriate list of readings, definitely challenging for juniors and seniors—who are the target audience—but likely to overwhelm first-years and second-years—who are restricted from registering for the course. He clearly outlines learning objectives, policies, grading structure, and the weekly schedule. His Canvas site has all the necessary information, though as a new Canvas user, it took me some time to navigate it and find things. This may be due to my own inexperience, but I recommend streamlining and making material as accessible as possible.

In terms of assignments, I reviewed the weekly reading summaries and the midterm. Leon requires students to summarize the readings weekly, offer their assessment, and suggest some discussion questions. The student-produced example I saw was an outstanding model of writing and comprehension. The student clearly understood the readings, analyzed them in a sophisticated manner, and came up with thoughtful discussion prompts. If this is the exception rather than the average among students, however, I would suggest some kind of support or scaffolding to help weaker students who struggle to comprehend the readings or have difficulty writing. The midterm seemed quite substantial (the questions could be easily revised for graduate qualifying or comprehensive exams) and the sample student exam that Leon shared was approximately eight pages, single-spaced. Again, it seemed like a very solid and sophisticated response to the five exam questions, so I imagine this is one of the strongest students in the class. Again, I worry about other students who may struggle with comprehension and writing and suggest that the instructor make sure there are adequate tools in place to gauge this and support student learning.

Professor Leon has an innovative assignment where students look up Department of Corrections' mission statements from different states and report back on what kind of language they use (key words). This assignment may be well suited to do during class, for example, giving students ten minutes to do the research online (assigning different states to different groups), and then having them share their findings in the Chat or in discussion. This might engender a livelier discussion online and generate more interaction and debate.

For the synchronous session, Professor Leon began class by welcoming students (addressing them by name), gave them time to settle in, and started with an opening question about one of that day's readings--Chapter 2 from Angela Davis, *Are Prisons Obsolete?* He presented the session's learning objectives on his first PowerPoint slide, an excellent practice that we should all follow to ensure students understand the day's goals. Professor Leon spoke very clearly and went through his slides at a good pace. He linked to and displayed relevant websites at points during the class. He also asked questions for discussion, though most of the students seemed rather shy. A few ventured responses. His slides had a good amount of information (not too much, not too little). He also checks the Chat regularly to see what students are posting during class. Some had comments on points he made or on the readings or previous classes. There's a lot going on in remote classes! (see below).

Overall, this session made clear to me the many challenges of teaching remotely and the fact that we will need to keep adapting our pedagogical methods to make this effective. It is difficult to sustain students' attention and many keep their cameras off, probably for a number of reasons. They all kept their microphones off also, probably a good thing to avoid any background noise distractions as the instructor lectures or the class discusses. In addition, although SAS initially encouraged us to offer asynchronous courses to lessen the structural barriers for students who work, have to share broadband with family members, or have other difficult circumstances, it appears students are longing for synchronous sessions because they feel isolated and miss the sense of community and engagement with their classmates. All of this is to say that there are not any universal standards on which to evaluate remote teaching, so I am focusing on the things I observed that seemed like good practices, and a few things that could be improved.

I would suggest that Dr. Leon pause a little longer after asking the class for questions and/or comments. It may take students a moment to unmute their microphones, they may need time to think, or they may just hesitate before offering a comment. I have seen many presenters ask for questions and then move on very quickly, so this is a universal issue. Leaving a longer pause may just generate a bit more class participation.

I appreciate that Professor Leon teaches rather complex concepts in criminal justice theory, such as the classic debate between utilitarian vs. retributivist views of punishment. These are dense and complicated ideas for undergraduates. I would urge him to prepare examples or details in advance to explain these theories effectively and to make sure students grasp fine distinctions. Those present seemed to understand fairly well, but I worry about those who did not attend. One way of checking student comprehension is to ask students to summarize the lecture's key ideas at the end of class. Another is to offer points for posting a summary on Canvas to those who miss live lectures.

Overall, I was quite impressed with Dr. Leon's course design and his teaching. It is evident that he is passionate about his subject matter, is a compassionate, caring teacher, and a thoughtful pedagogue. He is on his way to becoming an outstanding educator. I am confident that he is contributing positively to student learning and educational outcomes in our department and CJS.

Sincerely,
Lilia Fernandez

Cc: Kathy Lopez, K. Sebastian Leon

Teaching review, Professor Sebastian Kenneth Leon, Fall teaching 2020

--Lisa Miller, Professor of Political Science and Criminal Justice

For this review, I examined Professor Leon criminal justice course, State Corporate Crime (496:02). The course is offered as an asynchronous class, with optional, weekly synchronous Zoom sessions. I reviewed the Canvas site for the course, including the syllabus, assignments, grading, recorded mini-lectures, and the one recorded synchronous discussion. I also spoke with Prof. Leon about his experiences with the class and his interactions with students. In addition, since it is so difficult to assess teaching under the current conditions, I also reviewed teaching evaluations from Professor Leon's Introduction to Criminal Justice (Fall 2019).

I am no expert in on-line teaching but I will focus on the core expectations for teaching undergraduate students, no matter the format: offering content related to the course subject matter, helping students understand ideas and concepts, making materials accessible, clearly outlining expectations, respecting students time and perspective.

The syllabus is very clear. It includes course expectations, weekly assigned readings and requirements, and it also has specific points in relation to the exceptional circumstances of the Fall 2020 semester. Under a highlighted portion of the syllabus titled, "COVID-19 Academic Continuity Statement," Prof. Leon explains precisely how the course will work and what students can expect regarding both the asynchronous and synchronous. The syllabus also includes clearly delineated learning goals. Required readings, assignments, grading scale, and weekly assignments are also laid out in the syllabus. The assignments include Weekly Reading Summary Responses, a midterm, and a final.

Professor Leon offered an introductory video that provided key information about the course. He also noted the unique challenges posed by the pandemic, and reassured students that he would be available to talk about assignment deadlines and other issues if they faced particular struggles. Subsequently, Prof. Leon provided two additional short videos that focused on weekly readings early in the semester. There is also one recorded synchronous session. In discussion with Prof. Leon, he explained that, after the first synchronous meeting, he determined that recording the sessions might make students less willing to speak openly and freely and, since the sessions were optional, he did not record subsequent sessions. However, he indicated that approximately six to ten students came each week to the optional sessions.

Prof. Leon has had regular communication with the students through the Announcements feature of the Canvas site, providing weekly reminders about the synchronous discussions, clarifying assignments and readings, responding to questions, and so on. Prof. Leon also indicated very clearly on his syllabus how to reach him via email for an individual appointment.

The primary interaction with students is the weekly reading summaries, which require students to summarize the readings, offer a compliment, a critique, and a question. I read numerous summaries randomly and the students seem to have been very committed to these assignments, which are worth thirty percent of the grade. Most of the summaries were quite engaged, which I think reflects the nature of the assignment. By asking for a summary the readings, and then requiring students to consider them from a positive and critical perspective, students seem to have engaged the readings fairly thoroughly.

For feedback, Prof. Leon provided a color-coded key and he also offered students the opportunity to revise two of the assignments:

- GREEN highlights = excellent/high importance phrases or sentences
- RED highlights = low quality or otherwise substantively incorrect or under-qualified sentences/phrases. AKA the equivalent of a red pen
- ORANGE highlights = potential topics for collaborative discussion or follow-up (e.g., Maybe I understand what you're saying, but being able to talk about it would be ideal)
- PINK highlights = material I might reincorporate into recorded lectures
- Strikethroughs and in-text comments are self-explanatory.
- Everyone will have an opportunity to revise and resubmit their first 2 WRS assignments, should you choose to do so.

The course seems well-organized and, in the one recorded synchronous meeting, Professor Leon demonstrated genuine engagement with the students. He posed questions for them, responded well to their questions, and generally came across as very knowledgeable and helpful to students.

Professor Leon's evaluations for Introduction to Criminal Justice in Fall 2019 are very strong. Most responses are at or exceed the average for the course. Student evaluations include comments praising Prof. Leon's enthusiasm and his teaching style:

- I liked the teacher's enthusiasm and passion for the subject, I also enjoyed his teaching style.
- Leon kept the class interesting with strong and interesting lectures
- The material was interesting, you were funny enough that it added to the class :)
- Student interaction was very well received and placed in a timely manner
- I really enjoyed the connections that were made with the material and real-life examples. It made it much easier to comprehend

Summary

Professor Leon seems to be an engaged, dedicated instructor, encouraging students to think analytically, providing clear expectations for readings and assignments, and offering multiple opportunities for meeting with him, a particularly important element of teaching under the current conditions. In the few on-line videos I observed, he responded well to student questions and, equally as important asked them questions that were clearly designed to get them thinking critically. He seemed to set a tone that was very approachable and open.

For any future online courses, Prof. Leon might consider adding elements that provide more feedback for students and interaction among students, e.g., requiring peer reviews or student presentations, providing more extensive feedback on the reading summaries, or even including one-on-one sessions to discuss the students' work. This latter option is, of course, very time consuming. But in smaller classes it goes a long way to helping ensure that students are engaged. In addition, it might be helpful to include a short summary or set of questions about the weekly topic in each of the modules on the Canvas site. Of course, there is no guarantee students will read these questions or summaries, but it adds another layer of material that can help students draw together the main ideas and concepts in the course, which can be hard to do in an on-line class, especially an asynchronous one.

I visited Prof. Sebastian's class on October 31, 2019. The course is a mid-level introduction to Racial issues within the US's Criminal Justice system. The room was a large conference room suitable for a class of 40 or 50 students, but this course's attendance and likely enrollment was less than 20. Prof. Sebastian presented basic concepts in the field through revision of the readings, slides in outline form and video clips. He was well prepared to present each thematic goal with a mix of materials and style but was quickly able to pivot to question and answer mode in interaction with the students. Prof. Sebastian illustrated each theoretical or conceptual point in the abstract but also with very specific case illustrations that demonstrated changing perceptions and legal practices towards behaviors that might or might not be considered "crime" or illegal.

Prof. Sebastian's style and repertoire kept student attention and engagement. The slides he presented served as the basis to and promoted further explanation and discussion of key concepts or cases. From discussion and illustrations of distinctions between Crime, Criminality, and Criminalization Prof. Sebastian moved to discussion of the historical and political origins of War on Drugs policy and its racial (black/white) implications. Through a discussion of an article by Muhammad of racialized perceptions of criminality Prof. Sebastian developed the idea that ideas about crime are relative, but did not as clearly explain what lies behind different racial outcomes of engagement with the CJ system based on the reading.

From there Prof. Sebastian moved to discuss substance prohibitions and how policy changed depending on perceptions of threat and moral panic, some of which was racialized. Prof. Sebastian could have clarified if his examples were intended to illustrate the racial bias built into the administration of power and "justice" or if they represented the totality of how these systems operate.

Prof. Sebastian then went further into discussion with students of the readings and materials presented through Q & A. Responses were hesitant and while it was clear that students had read the material by Muhammad, they initially seemed confused about the article's argument but were able to produce a lively and relevant discussion guided by Prof. Sebastian's questioning.

My sense was that Prof. Sebastian covered a range of classroom styles and practices in one class session very effectively. His materials are well organized and thought out in relation to his goals. But the implied complexities (historical, political, racial) of presenting challenging and overarching concepts to students will require further development, especially with how illustrating one concept, practice or bias does not coherently or necessarily define the larger system.

I met and discussed my notes and specific critiques or suggestions (attached) with Prof. Sebastian a few days after the course session.

Aldo A. Lauria Santiago

Professor