



**OBSERVATION OF TEACHING**  
**SPRING 2014**

**Candidate:** Myisha Cherry

**Department:** Philosophy

**Rank:** Adjunct Instructor **Date of Visit:** Wed, April 23

**Observer:** James DiGiovanna

**Course & Section:** Phi 322.02: Judicial and Correctional Ethics

Present your observations below. The committee is interested in all aspects of the candidate’s performance: Knowledge and organization of subject matter, method and appropriateness of presentation, ability to explain, encouragement to thinking on the part of students, personal manner and attitude toward students, student response, speaking ability. When illustrations will clarify your comments, please illustrate. A balanced assessment of the candidate’s strengths and weaknesses will be most helpful. Please try to estimate whether his/her level of competence is above or below average.

Myisha Cherry’s class began on time with a greeting to the students; it was clear immediately that there was a friendly rapport in the classroom, and that Ms. Cherry had cultivated a positive atmosphere of conversation and leadership.

She began by employing two students to pass back homework from a previous class, which seemed like a clever way to get the students to know each other’s names, improving classroom cohesion. I wondered how the students were chosen, and if different students performed this task each class, which would seem wise.

Ms. Cherry then announced that the next class would include a debate on transgender issues in prison. She told the students to be prepared to argue for “either position,” (presumably she had laid out two position previously) and that students wouldn’t know which position they’d be taking until the day of the class.

This seemed to me an excellent way to teach argument construction, and Ms. Cherry noted that the arguments would be produced collectively, so that multiples students would be responsible for fleshing out position and adding premises. She also wisely warned students that “this is not personal and that people are not

necessarily in agreement with the position they are presenting.” Again, this struck me as wise warning, and I assumed she would repeat it in the next class.

She then commenced the day’s lesson, by asking the students “what did you learn” from the reading. Many professors start with more specific questions, and Ms. Cherry would indeed get to more specific questions, but this opening allowed students an opportunity to steer the discussion, and a chance to speak outside the constraints of a teacher-presented set of concerns.

The students immediately and actively participated. Among the points volunteered: there are benefits to nurturing a child while incarcerated. There is a dearth of long-term studies, so many of the positions lack definitive proof. Children do better when raised in stable relationships.

Ms. Cherry then laid out three headers on the board, and for the rest of the class organized responses under these headers. They were:

Benefits	Problems	Models
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I’m a huge supporter of this kind of graphic/verbal presentation , as I think it’s a helpful mnemonic and shows students how to organize their thinking about a topic or piece of writing.

Ms. Cherry then, through discussion with the class, filled out the headers in order, starting with benefits, but occasionally, when a student would anticipate a later point, putting notes under the other headers and then returning to flesh them out when the time came.

I’m tempted to include here complete notes on the discussion, which was excellent, and which showed both strong student participation (I lost count of how many students participated, but in a very full room it seemed that at least half voluntarily did so), but for the sake of space I’ll just say that I detailed discussion of research, findings, concerns, and the ethics of raising children in prison and of taking them from their mothers were well covered.

Ms. Cherry was especially adept at presenting multiple positions. While she seemed to hold that it was best to raise children with their mothers, she did a good job explaining how this might violate principles of retributive justice, the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment, and the child’s best interest if the prison is not a positive environment or if the child is damaged by ultimately being separated from its mother.

She also covered responses to all these points, showing that certain models (the third section of her chart) could address at least some of these concerns. During the course of this discussion students engaged in active

debate, taking multiple positions, and arguing with each other through Ms. Cherry's mediation. The debate was forceful, well-informed, and remained focused on issues.

My one critique here was that one student raised an objection that seemed to go beyond the bounds of the reading, and Ms. Cherry did not incorporate it into the discussion, perhaps thinking it would take the class too far afield. This student noted that the debate was predicated on the notion that "mother" meant "birth mother," and he said that if we accept that there are many sorts of mothers and parents, and that a loving, stable parent needn't be the birth mother, we might obviate the problem from the child's point of view (though, obviously, the mother would still be penalized for being pregnant.)

This did seem to undercut the argument from the reading, and while Ms. Cherry noted that it was a good point, she moved on from it rather quickly. Still, this was one comment in the course of a very engaged debate, so I can't fault her too much for allowing it to pass when so much was being incorporated into the diagram on the board and the larger argument surrounding it.

The class finished with a brief video about the "Washington System," which allows women who give birth while imprisoned to raise their children for up to three years in prison if they meet certain criteria. When the classroom AV system didn't work, Ms. Cherry inventively directed the students to watch the video on YouTube using their own devices. This was a good (if necessarily imperfect) solution, and was, I think, typical of the way Ms. Cherry thinks on her feet in the classroom.

She showed excellent leadership, strong command of the material, and exemplary tone with the students. They clearly both respected and liked her (as is evident by the high turnout she received when giving a talk for the Philosophy department a few weeks later) and is an excellent addition to our adjunct teaching staff.

Though I hear Ms. Cherry is off to acquire her PhD in the coming semesters, and will not be available to us, I strongly recommend her reappointment.

Observer's Signature

Date

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Chairperson's Signature

Date

FORM B