

Sample Student Evaluations for José Vergara
Russian 005: Back to the Future – Contemporary Russian Culture & Society
Swarthmore College
Fall 2020

“This was such an awesome class, and Professor Vergara was an incredible instructor. I learned so much about my own writing style and how to improve it and the fascinating content of the syllabus. This course was extremely engaging and made me really excited to continue more Russian studies.”

“I gained a holistic understanding of Russian literature, society, and history. It was interesting how literature reflects social situations. One of the lessons that stuck out to me was the interview with Rymbu, whose ideas resonated with my fire for activism. I also really loved the movie *Beanpole* and the novel *The light and the dark* that portrayed wartime memories and love from different angles. Most of the books were bizarre in their own ways and thus memorable and educational.”

“I learned a lot about how to approach literary analysis and found the works we read to be very memorable. *The Light and the Dark* and *Playing the Victim* were my two favorite works we studied, and this class encouraged me to explore more (contemporary) Russian literature. Another memorable thing for me was the interviews we had with authors we read. All of them were incredibly interesting to talk to, and hearing about their writing processes was intriguing. I especially loved Shishkin’s answer that his books are repeated attempts to answer the same questions.”

“I think the most memorable things from this course were definitely some of the author interviews! It was always fascinating to hear the authors speak about their books and their perspectives on life, and fun to look at similarities or differences between them.”

“I learned a large amount about Russian history and culture, but the most important skill I learned was the nuance that can be explored in each piece of media, and general tips in critical thinking and effectively translating ideas to essays and presentations.”

“I gained an appreciation for Russian literature that I didn’t think I would. In the future, I would be more open to reading Russian novels for leisure. I think this was a big take away for me and I’m very happy with it.”

“I think the interviews we had with the various authors included in the syllabus provided some of the most interesting discussions and perspectives. This really exciting experience to be able to ask the author a question about the book you just read was extremely fascinating. Our conversation with Mikhail Shishkin was my favorite. Hearing his perspective on the world and the flow of events was really interesting to me. Our conversation with Galina Rymbu was also very memorable and really fun. Our conversation with Buksha was also especially memorable and made me think more about the role of academia in culture. Her perspective was so different than my own in a really eye-opening way. I really appreciated her honest communication of the things that went into her novel.”

“I look forward to taking another course with professor Vergara if my schedule permits.”

“I really enjoyed the course, got into several engaging discussions, and had a great semester. I would hundred percent retake this course if I could. I want to thank Professor Vergara for being accessible, accommodating, and resourceful for us.”

“Professor Vergara is a really awesome professor, and I think he did a really good job with this course. I think I would have enjoyed the course more, of course, if we could have done it in person like in normal times, but I think it was set up and executed about as well as it could be remotely.”

“One of the best things about Professor Vergara was how easy it was to reach him for help during the course. The promptness and depth of his replies was an amazing resource throughout the semester and I very much appreciated it.”

“The shift to zoom teaching has been successful in general. During discussion, we were asked to type numbers (1-4) for contributing to conversation, jumping the queue, asking question, etc. it really helped to keep up the flow of the discussion. I can't really think of anything that didn't work well. (Especially since we have in person sessions on Fridays).”

“This was one of the few classes this semester where the professor has well adopted zoom learning into his curriculum. I was surprised at how even though we were learning remotely, the discussions flowed well and occasionally felt like we were all sitting together in a classroom. One of the techniques that facilitated these was the student-led discussions that allowed us to feel more autonomy in directing the classes. This encouraged us to participate more and end up enjoying the class. Another technique I really liked was the 1,2,3s that helped avoid any

awkward situations like talking over each other on zoom. The breakout rooms were another technique that worked well over zoom.”

“Yes, Professor Vergara used a variety of zoom functions in order to make his class more interactive in the remote format. Breakout rooms, shared google docs, and having a discussion leader each week were all effective at making the shift to remote learning successful.”

“A flexible and democratic approach to our full-class zoom meetings was extremely effective in making the discussions user-friendly and easy to participate in. When things did not work as well we easily adapted to a new plan or added features to our zoom styles. The actual class time was always very effective and not hindered by a digital interface. Furthermore, the many options for face to face meetings following the Garnet Pledge were a very nice and effective addition to our digital class time.”

“I think all of the class materials were extremely well chosen, to an extent I am sure is well beyond my understanding. The topics in each novel or film that we discussed easily resonated with the news articles we examined and provided a lot of meaningful insight. There was an obvious application of specific expertise that made the flow of class feel extremely intentional and thought provoking while still being very organic as we moved from novel to novel and worked towards the broader goals of the class.”

“I really enjoyed the opportunity to talk to the authors of the books. The in class conversations enhanced my understanding of literature and contemporary Russian society.”

“‘Back to the Future’ may have been my favorite class of the semester due to your masterful ability to incorporate such a wide range of themes into the analysis of Russian literature, from the role of religion in ‘Day of the Oprichnik’ and ‘The Mountain and the Wall’ (among others), to that of mental health and alcoholism in ‘Trepanation of the Skull’, and of course, to that of Russia’s addictively intriguing history in perhaps every work we covered. And, though your choices of source material were fascinating and informative on their own, your diverse array of assignments, constant and insightful feedback, and unparalleled responsiveness to pressing questions made this class a tremendously impactful learning experience, and one that I expect will continue to impact the quality of my work and thought in future classes.

“I have really enjoyed having supplementary readings to our main readings; I think they provide essential historical/social context and make the main readings more engaging and

understandable. I also enjoy the node project for the same reason--following current news makes the relevance of the ideas in our readings more clear.”

“Class discussions have been the most useful and engaging part of this course. They allowed me to understand perspectives that I hadn’t considered in my own reading of the texts. This was especially useful because it’s the real advantage of a class, otherwise I can read the texts on my own and interpret them in my own private time. The author interviews were also very useful. They gave a perspective on the works that would otherwise be hard to find outside of class.”

“I think the in class discussions have been most useful because of the depth in which we talk about our readings. They help me understand and develop my own thoughts really well.”

“I have found our class discussions, readings, Omeka articles, and interviews with the authors to be the most useful and engaging. Class discussions have been integral to my ability to develop coherent thoughts about the pieces we have worked with, as my peers have extremely intelligent ideas to offer that I can consider and integrate into my own perspective. Additionally, having people to bounce my ideas off of in an open, supportive space has been extremely useful. Within our class discussions, I have found discussion leading to be very useful as well, as it provides the class with an overall framework to guide the conversation. Thus far, having a ‘guide’ for each of our discussions has been very effective. Our readings in and of themselves have been both engaging and useful in developing my knowledge of contemporary Russian society and the ability to analyze literature on a more general level. The node project has been very useful in developing my general knowledge of Russia as well. I like that we follow up with our node every single week, as I feel genuinely informed on the current events of Russia and the former Soviet Republics across a variety of domains.”

“I also liked being paired with another student for peer editing because I think my partner and I learned a lot from each other.”

“I wouldn't want to stop doing any aspects of the course; none come to mind when I think of the least useful/engaging.”

“The structure of the course has been more than satisfactory. Though the reading is heavy, it is manageable given the week time period given to complete it. I also appreciated the time given to revise the first essay after the first draft. The number of assignments has definitely been appropriate given the once-weekly schedule of this course. I think it had been

particularly effective to have a consistent structure for this course, meaning that we always have a node for the week as well as discussion questions of some sort. Therefore, no matter the nature of the assignment, there is a consistent structure to the class that allows the student to feel engaged in it throughout the week.”

“I enjoy the variety of writing assignments, which allows me to practice different types of writing and analysis. The feedback we receive is especially useful.”

“The content itself of the assignments was all good. I feel like it has helped me in transitioning to writing good essays for college work. Hopefully, this translates to other courses as well.”

“I really enjoy writing the news reflection, and it is fascinating for me to explore the connection between current events and class materials. Also, I learned a lot from the past essay prompt, especially during the revision process.”

“I think [the writing assignments] have all been very engaging, and I appreciate the frequency of short term and smaller writing assignments (omeka). I think it is a really good balance of short term/ longer essay.”

“The online discussion questions have been an effective way to gather my thoughts prior to class. Additionally, the questions for the authors have been well organized and formatted in a way that makes it easy for me to understand and engage with the thoughts of my peers prior to discussion. The node assignments have also been engaging and consistent ways to practice writing on a weekly basis. The analytical essay was very well structured, the guidelines were clear, and the prompts provided an adequate framework for the basis of an engaging paper. The time period provided for the essay was also sufficient. I really like that all of our writing assignments have some sort of logical succession of assignments before them as well. For example, we tend to have a reading, pre-discussion questions, an actual discussion, a debrief, an interview with the author, a draft, and then a revised draft for the larger assignments. I have found this to be a comprehensive and engaging structure for writing that allows me to develop my thoughts entirely before going into full analysis.”

“I like having the weekly article responses because they allow us to learn about events occurring in modern-day Russia. The close reading was also a valuable assignment for me because it allowed me to analyze a work extensively and spend more than one week looking at it. The best part about the writing assignments has been the feedback I received.”

“I really enjoy devising weekly questions, because they help me recap my thoughts during class and pay more attention to my reading. The close reading assignment was also a fun activity, and the in class discussions well prepared me for it.”

“I believe the discussions are run very well and I enjoy that they are led by students. I think that the numbering system we use makes it very easy to participate in and follow the discussion.”

“The discussions are well-organized throughout the course, and I think that everyone can contribute equally during the discussion. My classmates and the professor are very supportive all the time.”

“I feel like the discussions are super good! They feel really open and everyone expresses their ideas openly. I feel like my opinions are really listened to and that we all do a good job (although we can always do better) responding to each others’ thoughts instead of each just talking about their own thing.”

“The classroom atmosphere has been extremely agreeable this semester. All of my peers are extremely intelligent, well-spoken, and respectful. Having a guide for each discussion has been particularly effective in order for the class to remain structured as well. I like that there is an emphasis on collaboration via 1-1 or small-group discussions prior to full-class work, as this allows students to constructively bounce ideas off of each other. There is definitely a healthy balance between opportunities to express your own ideas freely and some sort of moderation by the guide so that the class can stay productive and consistently intellectually stimulating.”

“For a discussion over zoom, I think the in class discussion is as good as it can be. At first, I was skeptical of having a discussion leader, but this format has actually worked very well.”

“I think that the feedback I receive is very constructive and more than I expected.”

“I felt there were a lot of avenues to receive feedback and I hugely appreciated all of them.”

“The feedback is very constructive and it helps me identify my strength and weaknesses. If I am still unsure about certain comments, I can ask the professor during office hour sessions.”

“I think the feedback is very constructive. I really have appreciated the opportunity to get in person / conversational feedback in addition to the longhand comments.”

“The feedback I have received both in-person and online has been constructive thus far. It has helped me truly consider the value of the ideas I bring to class, as well as evaluate my skills in writing and public speaking. The comments on our first writing assignment specifically were

well developed and maintained a constructive structure via the combination of in-text comments, a rubric, and long-hand comments.”

“I’d say [feedback on essays] is quite productive because it’s very to-the-point. The rubric in particular effectively highlights the basic areas that need improvement, and the individual comments help formulate how to improve said areas.”

“I always look forward to the feedback from the professor because rather than being evaluated on whether our responses are correct or incorrect, we are always given a new direction to look to or further explore. This helps us branch out and build our ideas. I also think I get a lot of feedback during the class discussions, especially when my peers comment on my argument/statement. It’s always nice to know what others feel about the same topic, and it sometimes help clear my headspace or change my regard of something to a better direction.

“I have been impressed by the return-rate of assignments. Other professors tend to take much more time, which can lead me to become disengaged with the assignment by the time it is returned.”

“Professor Vergara responds very quickly to emails (so quickly that my friends and I have started placing bets on how quickly he will reply). He also returned feedback on my close essay within 3 days which exceeded my expectations by far.”

“The feedback for writing assignments are provided almost always a few days after and especially for the close reading at least a week before it was due. It was more than enough time.”

“I think that coming in the course I thought of literary analysis as simply identifying what clear literary techniques were used (personification, metaphor, simile) often and writing a thesis that listed these techniques out explicitly. Working with the writing assistants and reading my peers’ excellent papers helped me expand my view of literary analysis; I now understand that the analysis can include more than just explicit/simple literary techniques and should always be answering the question ‘so what?’. I feel that I’ve overcome a major hurdle in my writing (especially about literature)--whereas the first essay was difficult to write, the paper came much more naturally because of this ‘aha’ moment.”

“Reading *The Light and the Dark* and writing about it, as well as hearing Shishkin speak about it, was very much an ‘aha’ moment for me. It was really fascinating, and I had some interesting revelations about life in general during it!”

“Gandlevsky’s explanation of his perspective on life was pretty interesting and made me see death in a new perspective.”

“I had an ‘aha’ moment during an in-person session, during which we acted out one of the scenes in *Playing the Victim*. My classmates and I were tasked to act out a certain scene guided entirely by stage directions, in which everyone had to fake cry in their own unique way. I was really struggling with this section of the play, and my ‘aha’ moment came when I got to see how everyone conducted themselves when tasked with acting. As we went through the scene, I finally came to understand the ‘disillusionment with reality’ that was at the crux of *Playing the Victim*, as I felt that it mimicked itself quite well at that moment. From that moment, I learned that a lot of the point of the techniques directors utilize in films/plays is to mimic human life, which is so difficult to do that it can feel impossible to understand. I typically had issues with understanding the plays/films in the class, but this moment helped me understand how to put them into a more directly human perspective from which I could analyze them as if they were truly happening around me. This moment in a class taught me a lot about theatrical techniques, despite the comical nature of it, which I could then apply when I was watching *The Return*. For example, as I watched the movie, I could think of it in the context of ‘How would my classmates act this out?’, which helped me put scenes in the film into perspective and therefore analyze the choices of the director with much more coherence.”

“From Thompson’s *Russia* to Epstein’s essay to ‘The New Robinson Crusoes’ and more, I remember when I first did the readings for this class, I was confused on how these works were connected to each other. My aha moment came when I realized how there were overarching themes present in most, if not all, of them: i.e. reality vs. ideals, fear of change in the post-Soviet society, etc. I took away how to identify bigger themes from multiple literary works and evaluate it from a real-life perspective, which is a skill I’ve been using on other novels we’ve read after (For example: I was enlightened as we unveiled one of the many interpretations of ‘The New Robinson Crusoes’ retaliative to the ‘old’ Robinson Crusoe and how the characters are going through their own shipwreck and that this connects to the collapse of the Soviets, which is topic discussed in Epstein’s essay). It’s meaningful how I developed insight on ways to approach literature.”

“Overall, this class has been extremely fulfilling and engaging. The vast majority of our assignments have felt productive and intellectually-stimulating.”

“Though I want to provide constructive criticism, I honestly can’t find one thing about this course that is disengaging me from learning.”