

Sample Student Evaluations for José Vergara
Russian 037: Crime or Punishment – Russian Narratives of Incarceration and Captivity
Swarthmore College
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“I have found the breakout rooms before discussion and the weekly question documents both most useful and engaging. The former allows students to sort out their thoughts, test them against those of their peers, and prepare to contribute productively to the class as a whole. The question document, likewise, provides space for students to expand their thoughts beyond class, offer their interpretation of the literature before their ideas become influenced by the class (which is typically positive), and form connections with peers that might lead to conversations beyond formal class. The discussion document also remains engaging because it is spread throughout the week; if you choose to wait to reply to a discussion question until after class on Thursday, the readings don't just leave your mind right after class. The document maintains a lively rhythm and ensures a solid routine. I also have found the mapping project particularly engaging. Not only has it provided reason to engage with work important to prison literature that is not on the syllabus, but it has been a way to extend skills learned in class, either of argumentation, analysis, or even annotation, quite independently. It is also exciting to know that the mapping project will eventually be a more eloquent whole, comprised of individual student work that will likely show influence from the class discussion as well. The process of paper revision, though not yet complete for this class, is one that I highly value as a staple of a JV course :). The guides provided with the paper also provided super useful direction to stimulate the start of the ever-feared writing process.”

“I think the breakout rooms have been really important in engaging in conversation and then being able to bring back different thoughts helps me comprehend the information.”

“The discussion groups, the 3 tier messaging system and the in class discussions and activities.”

“I have really enjoyed when the class discussions are related to a certain question, and I also like the breakout rooms that we do before the large group discussion. I think it's a good way to brainstorm and feel more confident going into a larger conversation.”

“The aspect of the course that I have found most engaging are the docs where we are to share our questions and responses for the week. Although they serve as a way for us to interact with the perspectives of our peers, I believe the reflection time we take while producing our own points of view is an important way we develop our own understanding of the texts as well.”

“I've really enjoyed our in-class discussion time. Everyone has such different academic and personal experiences, so it's always interesting to hear what insights everyone brings to the texts.”

“I find the mini-lectures at the beginning of class really helpful in providing background for the texts that we are reading. I also find your comments summarizing and/or synthesizing the various

points that have been brought up during discussion to be helpful. Ooh! And peer reviews for our essays!”

“The parts of the course that I have found the most engaging have been the breakout rooms. It is incredibly helpful to have people to be able to talk about the texts with outside of the main class, and it is so helpful to see how people have processed their own interpretations of the texts. I also have enjoyed the questions/responses, as having those ahead of any assignment helps me to think a bit more critically while reading.”

“I wouldn’t say that there is something that’s not useful from the course because every assignment I can tell is utilized by all students. Even when developing my own questions weekly it helps to look at other people’s thoughts on the reading.”

“The structure of the course has been satisfying and engaging. The reading, though plenty, has yet to feel like busywork, nor has it been severely overwhelming. I, in fact, have added to my reading list from it, which serves as potential testimony that the reading is fruitful enough to cultivate personal interest, and not excessively abundant as to fetter independent thought. The writing assignments have been appropriate and manageable; I actually think it would have been nice and still feasible to have another paper earlier in the course to start the long-run process of writing a bit earlier. That’s just me, though; some other students might be upset by that prospect. I’ll reiterate that the assignments tailored to the asynchronous discussion have been nothing but great in terms of their structure and spacing.”

“I think that the spacing has been very considerate and honestly alleviates a lot of my stress!!!! I cannot emphasize that enough honestly. I really appreciate the focus on drafts and feedback, it really makes me feel like I can do my best work without being under a time crunch. The readings can be long but are definitely manageable and enjoyable. I am very happy with my workload and assignment numbers for this class.”

“I think that the structure has been a good mix of research and academic writing, and that considering the amount of work my classmates and I have for other classes it has been a good number of assignments as well. We have had time in between each so that I, at least, have not had to immediately go from one to the next which is very nice.”

“In fulfilling the course’s goals, I would say the both the number and spacing of assignments have worked really well. Week after week I believe the texts have added unique insights that help to further our understanding of Russian incarceration and the idea of power.”

“I really appreciate that our assignments are spaced out so that they are manageable. I’m also very glad that we’re working on this mapping project and splitting it into milestones and getting feedback at every stage. I love that you provide feedback and follow-up with the work we do, I think that has been incredibly helpful.”

“It’s neat to try writing in different genres and for audiences beyond just the one professor grading your work.”

“I have enjoyed the writing assignments thus far. As mentioned, I appreciate the independence prescribed to the mapping project, the structure and spacing of the assignments for it, and

the nature thereof. The author biography practices an important form of public writing, as it requires that the writer describes an individual likely unknown to some of the audience in enough detail and in the appropriate language to encapsulate much of their character. The additional reading section was a low-stress way to engage with academic writing. I also appreciate that the analysis portion will be concise. The paper was also fulfilling in completion, directly correlated with the readings in structure, and a nice dive into literary analysis. I appreciate the paper's length and the opportunity to revise and thus learn to write."

"In general though, the discussion posts are good for keeping us accountable for our readings but also to brainstorm ideas to talk about during class."

"There has been a good mixture of research and persuasive writing."

"[The paper] gave myself and others the freedom to do a topic of their choosing. Although some would prefer a more structured prompt, which takes away the hassle in even thinking about what to write, being able to write on a topic of our choice may motivate us more to produce a solid paper. The assignments for the mapping project I've found to enjoyable/interesting as well. Once again we are offered independence in the sense that we get to choose a literary work and the articles for the further reading. Even though they relate to the overall idea of Russian incarceration and crime, each offers a unique take on the subject."

"I think the mechanics of putting 1/2/3 in chat is innovative, and having student discussion leaders is good for de-centering the authority of the professor. The activities have been helpful for getting started in interpreting the readings in a productive way."

"I appreciate the variety of discussion formats employed, despite the limitations of zoom. It makes the days when we only do a broader class discussion even better, as I am used to breakout rooms, interactive documents, and direct questions. I also enjoyed the few agree/disagree activities that we did; they helped center the class on productive discussion. I also find it helpful that you speak appropriately often, to recenter a conversation that may have went astray or become distorted, or to simply sum up and clarify the important ideas discussed and offer your own arguments."

"I think that the class atmosphere is great. Everyone is understanding of each other" interpretations and I don't feel at a rush to contribute or feel overlooked. I think the queue definitely help. I think having the discussion groups with certain prompts helps us talk freely over our own thoughts before sharing them with the whole class."

"Everybody seems to participate at least once or twice each class, which is a very healthy dynamic compared to other Zoom discussions I have participated in."

"I believe the discussion component of this course has worked well. From what I see, my peers seemed to be motivated to share their responses or ideas on the week's readings and answer any questions raised by the instructor. It's kind of ironic that this class atmosphere is more upbeat considering the topics of our discussion."

“I definitely feel like I have the opportunity and space to express my ideas freely in class. I enjoy that we try different activities and find a lot of value in things like watching the video of Sakhalin or learning to tap codes to each other over Zoom. I think it broadens my understanding of the topic within the text, even if our experience is very different from the one we learn about in the text.”

“The class atmosphere is great, and I always walk away having learned something new whether it is in a breakout room or the large class. The discussion formats with the 1,2,3s is also pretty cool and helps with being able to get a word in without having to cut someone off or have an awkward zoom staredown.”

“Feedback for the polished draft from you and my peer reviewer was really helpful and constructive! Not sure how to improve it because the prompt for peer review was set up really nicely to enable constructive criticism.”

“The feedback I have received has been constructive thus far. I appreciate the focus on bigger picture issues in our writing. I find that, rather than nitpicking directly, you are very good at pointing out larger issues in essays that will draw the writer themselves to dive deeper. That allows for an uncluttered document that is more navigable and conducive to willing revision.”

“I definitely appreciate the feedback I get both from classmates and Professor Vergara. I can rely on getting a thoughtful response to any discussion posts or written assignments in a way that is constructive and helpful.”

“Feedback for this course is very constructive because it encourages a deeper perusal of the topic, especially for me on my 5-6 page paper where Professor Vergara asked me to better explain myself in a few specific cases. Not only does the feedback encourage improvement of what has already been written, but it encourages the student to also consider what has not yet been written but should be.”

“I think [the professor’s feedback] forces me to reflect on my work even more and pushes me to make appropriate edits while considering how my writing may be perceived by others. It also allows me to take a step back from my writing and view it more as a whole. The means for providing feedback, either through word or email, works just fine.”

“I was shocked by how quickly you turned around the author biography and further reading feedback.”

“Yes, Professor Vergara provides feedback almost instantly.”

“Again, compared to some of my other classes, feedback is provided very quickly. Emails are usually responded to in the same day, and assignments are graded in a very reasonable amount of time.”

“I’ve gotten everything back quickly, even when it’s a longer project.”

“In ‘After the Ball’ when I found out in class that the beating was a messed up reflection of the dance, that really changed how I understood the piece.”

- “Most recently, I’d cite when the class, guided by the instructor, came to the conclusion that Ginzburg’s writing could be seen as a mirror itself. We progressed from a discussion of the aesthetic cues in Ginzburg’s writing, to [X]’s quotes pointing to her personal defamiliarization and lack of bodily description, to your helpful and final insertion that the writing can act as a mirror itself. This conclusion ties together key parts of the course: the body in literature, in its many amorphous forms; how writing, imbued with personality, captures humans and humanity; that captivity can make body and soul appear in different forms and ways; that writing, too, is limited and can distort. This moment was a combination of new perspectives and established ideas that fruitfully merged into a broader conceptualization of prison texts and the body, literally and figuratively ‘as a whole.’”
- “I think when we were speaking in regards to *Notes from a Dead House* that I realized the structure and the importance of the layout, it was an ‘aha’ moment.”
- “A lot of the concepts that we had been talking about beforehand, as far as the complete trust in the Soviet Union, the strangeness of time in prison, the want to forget emotions in order to survive... all of these themes and more have been building on each other throughout this course, and I was pleased to find all of these patterns especially within these past weeks.”
- “During discussion of *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* in class, the idea of having to evoke sympathy from your oppressor was raised I think by [X], I’m not entirely sure. I just remember [X] quoted Martin Luther King to demonstrate this idea. The more I thought about it, this way of thinking explains a lot. I don’t mean to be removed from the topic of Russian incarceration, but in America I feel race relations have always had to rely on the power of compassion in order to make any progress. Even today the rhetoric used by social movements always seem to highlight the experiences of the oppressed in a sensational manner. Although I understand those under authority or a power are in no position to raise a great defense, I never really liked the idea of submitting yourself. You maintain power this way.”
- “The Forché reading really solidified a few ideas about personal/political and the purpose and responsibility of art that I’d been thinking about. I had some thoughts as to my stance, but this reading put everything into words for me.”
- “I appreciate all of your accommodations, too, and the friendly, candid demeanor with which you lead the class!”
- “I really loved the course and want to say thank you for making it such an enjoyable experience :)”
- “I enjoyed the class immensely and looked forward to it every week. Thank you!”
- “The strategies for moderating discussion (putting 1, 2, and 3 in the chat) are really innovative and make conversations relatively smooth, and the activities like judicious use of breakout rooms,

as well as the google docs and jamboards are great.”

“Small group or partner discussions of zoom were helpful, gave a good chance to actually talk to other people in the class.”

“Breakout rooms and group documents that we can all edit simultaneously have been really helpful. This allowed us to get to know each other on a more individual level, and be able to have great discussions.”

“The shift from in-person to remote teaching/learning has been successful. Unique to Professor Vergara’s class was the use of a discussion system, in which we used a numbered system to coordinate who and when someone would speak. I would say this feature of the course was very successful and helped to create fruitful discussion.”

“The breakout rooms and attempts by Professor Vergara to ensure we remained engaged and had meaningful interactions by preparing questions and activities was awesome.”

“Lecturing over Zoom become[s] exhausting quickly so Professor Vergara’s focus on class-wide and small group discussion was helpful for retaining engagement. The use of StoryMap was also helpful I think, because it allows the completion of a large class project through only individual work.”

“The class materials were very appropriate and necessary. I think I was adequately prepared for everything for online classes.”

“For Professor Vergara, I would say that his teaching style is unique and I enjoyed it. I think I appreciated how well he structured the course and incorporating readings in order to help us craft an understanding of what the Russian Prison Text is and was. Maybe we can make the discussions longer ? :)”

“The class materials were appropriate because they could easily be read and accessed online. There is no need, at least in Professor Vergara’s classes, for different techniques and asynchronous materials are improving on-line learning.”

“The selected readings were very interesting and appropriate and they were easy to access through moodle. You could tell that every reading was thoughtfully selected and paired with other readings for the class/week. Progressing chronologically made sense for the course.”

“I learned so much more about Russian history in general, and was introduced to a whole crux of new Russian authors. I think everything I learned about prison experiences and different

styles of writing was especially interesting. I was also very fascinated with the moral questions and discussions we had around our readings. Overall, amazing class.”

“Given that I’ve never tried to immerse myself in Russian culture before, there were many memorable things I learned from this course. Broadly, I learned about what the Russian Prison Text is and how former generations of Russian writers used literature as a way to explain their experiences. I think I’ll always remember the texts I’ve read this semester. Each and every one of them [was] unique and new and it’s interesting to think about the ideas that go beyond what’s written on a page. For example, during our last week of class, during an interview with Kirill Medvedev, answering why his poetry breaks away from what is traditional, he responded that essentially by manipulating the structure of his poetry, he sought to create a political message. There were certain dominant ideologies growing within Russian society and by separating his poetry from that of others, he wanted to create a wedge between himself and the popular ideologies in which he disagreed with. It was really interesting and something I’m glad I got to experience.”

“This course made me fundamentally reconsider the structure, and even necessity, of the prison. I thought it was very interesting that the Czarist and Soviet systems in many ways mirrored the American carceral system.”

“It was interesting to learn about the evolution of the Russian carceral system, as well as theoretical background from Foucault, Davis, and Scarry. The ‘virtual panopticon’ had to be the most memorable learning experience for me.”

“A small thought I had was that I appreciate how well Professor Vergara structured his course around the idea of the Russian Prison Text and crime/punishment. Each week a text we read allowed us to become more familiar with the idea to the point that we’ve developed a good understanding of what such a text is and what sets it apart from other genres of literature.”