

Sample Student Evaluations for José Vergara
Russian 234: Ecological Displacement in Russophone Literature
Bryn Mawr College
Spring 2022

“Finally, thank you for a semester that has simultaneously broadened my horizons and centered my work around questions that matter to me. You have opened up so many pathways that I am both excited and apprehensive to follow. Of course, my previous language and literature classes with you have had an equally significant impact on my trajectory, but I feel that this class has had a particularly disruptive (in a good way!) influence on me as a person and student. Огромное спасибо! Я Вам очень благодарна!”

“Professor Vergara is an incomparably outstanding instructor. I had the privilege to learn from him when he taught at Swarthmore, and I loved his classes so much that I followed him to his new position at Bryn Mawr. He is very skilled at leading discussion in an inclusive and rigorous manner, by combining different types of activities – small group discussions, large group synthesis, in-class writing and drawing exercises – that push our understanding of the material while affording us the flexibility needed to share new ideas. I especially appreciated the in-class interviews, which allowed us to enter into dialogue with leading Russophone academics and activists. In terms of the assignments, Professor Vergara provides extremely detailed and nuanced feedback on every stage of the writing process. Thanks to his actionable feedback, I was able to modify my assignments and determine new directions for growth. I loved writing the pre-discussion questions, as they allowed me to clarify my thoughts before sharing them in class discussion. Professor Vergara actively seeks insights from students throughout the semester about his teaching, and he tells us in class when he is trying to make changes to address our feedback, which is a testament to the level of careful consideration that defines everything he does. I really liked the collaborative grading system. I have not had the chance to reflect so intentionally on all the work that I complete in other settings. It was very meaningful for me to spend time thinking about the purpose of the work that I do and to track my progress over the course of the semester through these self-evaluations.”

“Leads interesting discussions. Flexible/understanding. Feels like he cares about students and their

success. Projects/other large assignments could be about a wide range of topics.”

“He’s created a unique course that covers a wide range of topics through multiple mediums. He also incorporated multiple talks with authors and organized events for us to attend. The course work was also varied. He’s a great professor, gave a lot of really good feedback, and cared a lot about all of the work we did for the course.”

“Engaging everyone in discussion and allowing everyone to share their opinions and ideas.”

“A lot of the focus is placed on the students’ growth rather than the output of assignments.”

“I hadn’t taken any Russian literature classes before and I’ve only taken on literature class. But Professor Vergara did a good job of making the course approachable and at the same time engaging/challenging. Yes, the course is listed at the appropriate level because while it does take a lot of work, he does a good job of making the class welcoming and doable for everyone.”

“Deadlines were flexible if issues arose, and he often checked with the class as a whole to see if we felt deadlines were reasonable/let us set them as a group.”

“No issues here. He did a really good job of fostering a welcoming and inclusive classroom. It was a small class size so that helped as well but he never made anyone’s comments feel dumb. Only good things to say about Professor Vergara.”

“I think he did a good job in making sure we all got a chance to speak and also talking in smaller groups (even though this already is a very small group) so there wasn’t as much pressure. For some of the very confusing readings he also linked helpful resources to make the texts more accessible.”

“He does not let one student dominate the class and creates an environment in which everyone is comfortable to share their opinions.”

“Professor Vergara works hard to make sure that all aspects of the course are accessible and useful to students. He actively seeks out feedback on every component of the course. As I wrote above, he mentions when he is making changes to the course in response to student feedback, so it is clear that he takes this promise seriously. He provides informative background lectures while devoting most of the course to carefully scaffolded discussion that invites students to participate in different ways depending on their learning style and comfort level. At the same time, he provides valuable information about the nuances of Russian language and culture so

that students can access texts even if they do not have language training.”

“I would [recommend this course], it was interesting and had a reasonable workload.”

“Yes! Many of my friends have taken his courses and so I was recommended Professor Vergara. I am also recommending his classes to everyone else I know. Whatever topic he teaches, he will create a very engaging and interesting course. He does an incredibly job creating a class where everyone feels comfortable and at the same time challenged. 10/10 would recommend.”

“Yes. A friend asked me if I would recommend his course and I did. It definitely was a little difficult trying to understand the obscure writings of old dead Russian writers, but the challenge was fun and I think I learned a lot through this course.”

“I would. I think especially to ENV5 students, it introduced a new way of thinking and working around environmental issues.”

“I would recommend this course and professor without any reservations. Professor Vergara makes Russophone literature accessible and relevant to students of all backgrounds. He provides the structure needed to deepen engagement with texts, while encouraging students to take creative risks and approach the material in new ways. I also think that he provides specific, actionable, and meaningful feedback on writing that would be useful to any college student, regardless of major.”

“I learned a lot about the course material. I also improved on my writing. The course was fun and engaging on every level.”

“I enjoyed making the class playlist, it was fun to try to connect the readings to a piece of music.

“Professor Vergara is an amazing professor and I would recommend him to everyone. The course he designed are interesting, engaging, and challenging. The feedback he provides on your work is thorough and helpful. He leads great discussions. He works with you on every part of the course and will make sure that you have a good time.”

“Professor Vergara is, without a doubt, the most talented and supportive instructor I’ve ever had the privilege to learn from in my undergraduate career. Thanks to his mentorship, I am committed to pursuing a doctoral degree in Slavic studies or comparative literature. I aspire to emulate his teaching, research, and mentorship one day. His commitment to public-facing scholarship is unparalleled. He brings genuine intellectual curiosity to everything he does,

but he is also humble and genuinely inclusive. I am thankful to Bryn Mawr for investing in instructors like him and for allowing Swarthmore students like me to take his classes.”

“I loved [the environmental issues project] because it allowed me to engage with the material in a way that was both personally fulfilling and academically enriching. As I wrote in the introduction to the webpage, I avoided thinking in depth about many of the issues in this project for a long time, because I lacked the tools necessary to synthesize my thoughts and because I was too hesitant to say anything. As I revised the project, I combed through pages of notes/memories of conversations that I had not returned to in great detail since the fires. While I initially hesitated to include these quotes and fragments of conversation, I ultimately decided that attempting to resolve the questions that I raise in my voice alone would betray the structure of the project. [...] I feel like this project encouraged me to take risks and interact with texts in new ways. [...] I am very grateful to have had the chance to complete this project! The flexibility that you gave me allowed me to produce a piece of writing that I genuinely care about and feel invested in. I think that I will come back to it for a long time to come and will continue to build upon what is already.”

“It is not an exaggeration to say that this class has had a transformative impact on me. The empathy, humility, and openness that you model in class is helping to convince me that this field can have a beneficial and urgent impact on the communities around us, if we are open to continuously re-envisioning the format and goals of our work and painstakingly honest about its limitations, especially in precarious, devastating moments like this one. Of course, I still have doubts and reservations, but I think I am starting to feel a sense of agency as a writer and responsibility for my work that leaves me a bit more hopeful.

“This class is consistently the highlight of my week and remarkably compelling in terms of its content and structure (no surprise there!). I appreciate how you provide so many different ways to interact with the material. Before I come to class, I love having the opportunity to reflect on the readings by formulating discussion questions and reading other people's ideas in the central location of the Google Doc. The first written assignment was manageable in scope but allowed me to deeply engage with my favorite readings and test different approaches to writing and translation, which evolved over the course of my time in the class. You provided a helpful structure for thinking about peer review, and as always, your written

feedback is specific, useful, and insightful. In every class, you provide just the right amount of historical and political context needed to approach the issues at hand while centering the voices of students through varied activities. Small group discussions and in-class writing enable multiple conversations to take place simultaneously and give everyone the opportunity to speak. In large group discussions, you facilitate the natural progression of the conversation while encouraging students – through verbal cues/follow-up questions, classroom setup, etcetera – to actively listen to each other.”

“Honestly, I can’t think of any aspects of the course that have not been productive. I’m enjoying working on the environmental issues project, and the general pace of assignments and reading works very well. In general, I think that everyone in the class is present and very thoughtful about how they interact with others and approach the material. I do feel like it might be helpful to slightly increase the number of times people are required to post discussion questions. Of course, it’s not necessary to make people write them every day, but it might help everyone feel more ownership of/accountability for their own learning and for the conversations we have as a class.”

“I think the structure of the course is great, and more classes should be structured like it (in terms of the variety of assignments/guest speakers/reading material). I appreciated how a lot of the speakers were placed on the week when assignments are due so that there are fewer readings for that week. Perhaps the number of assignments/workload leans toward the heavier side for a course open to anyone but I wouldn't know what to cut.”

“Yes, the spacing and number of assignments has been appropriate. I feel like there is enough time to provide peer review and take full advantage of the revision process, without being too overwhelmed by other assignments.”

“I think the writing assignments have been appropriate, and the drafting/peer review/final essay structure has been helpful in improving my work.”

“Creating discussion questions are a good opportunity to think about the readings more critically, as you are forced to adopt a more analytical lens. I think this also goes for the discussion leading presentations, which also allow you to take some creative control before getting into the discussion.”

“The peer reviews are a good exercise to challenge your point of views as well as simply work on your writing/editing skills.”

“In class writings are always a fun change of pace and I enjoy having a moment to reflect before getting into discussion.”

“I think having the mandatory draft/revise process for essays is great.”

“I love the discussion leading questions and supplementary questions. It’s been cool to see how ideas and threads have developed over the semester. The drafting and peer review process is very useful – your comments help me to work through my decision-making process and try out alternative possibilities.”

“I feel comfortable expressing my ideas in the class; I feel the atmosphere is friendly and non-judgmental.”

“I think the classroom environment has become very comfortable and an easy space to share ideas. Rarely do I feel that I couldn’t share something I thought might be of value. Overall, the discussion aspect of this course is the place where I feel I get the most out of the readings, and I’m grateful listening to everyone’s thoughts and ideas.”

“I feel very comfortable expressing my opinions in class.”

“I think that the discussion component of the class is always very well structured and conducive to a collaborative environment. I feel like there is a good balance of voices in the class. You do a good job of eliciting contributions from quieter people without creating a sense of pressure to talk for the sake of talking. The composition of class activities allows us to move smoothly between individual reflection, small-group conversations, and large-group discussion.”

“I thought the feedback on our essays was great. It was specific enough that it helped me figure out the issue areas in my paper as opposed to unhelpful vague comments.”

“I think that the feedback is specific, thoughtful, and inspirational. I appreciate how closely you read all of our work and provide multiple levels of suggestions. There is a very productive balance between the structure afforded by the rubrics, the free form narrative comments, and the phrase-level suggestions. I do not think that there is a need to improve how feedback is provided.”

“Yes, as always, you respond to emails and returns assignments in a very short amount of time. I am grateful to you for always being so generous with your ideas while also providing concrete suggestions for revisions.”

“I think getting to interview authors is very helpful in bringing a deeper level of understanding to the course.”

“This course was the first time I encountered the term solastagia - the entire concept seemed extremely relevant to what many communities face today when dealing with environmental disasters.”

“Revising my essay from the feedback gave me an ‘aha’ moment in connecting the aesthetics of mimicry and the role of nostalgia in how Nabokov bends space and time in his memoir. The connection wasn’t clear before so it felt like two separate things in my essay prior to revision.”

“I’ve learned a lot from discussion leading. I like how you approach it as a way of promoting collective engagement with the material. Sometimes, other classes require long presentations from each student and the discussion at the end feels like an afterthought that is disconnected from the presentation. The brief introduction presentations in this course enable us to work through our personal reading of the material and contextualize our questions, but the bulk of the presentation period requires us to figure out how to elicit responses from others and respond to them in a way that builds upon the group's understanding of the reading. As a result, I feel that we are becoming better teachers, readers, and students at the same time.”

“I am so grateful for all of the energy, consideration, and compassion that you bring to our class. I am thankful to you for approaching every meeting with patience, intellectual commitment, and a genuinely open mind. It is a privilege to be able to participate in our discussions. No matter how my life/week is going, I always know that this class will be meaningful and push me to understand literature, myself, and the world in new ways.”