

Form Fits Function: the Structure and Function of Ms. Kittay

Physiology, block 1. Even before the class starts, you can tell that Ms. Kittay loves the subjects that she teaches. The room is wonderfully colorful—absolutely covered with all things biology. A construction model of the DNA molecule circulates the entire room. One wall is filled with posters of amino acids from the second and third block AP Biology classes. Another wall is covered in pictures—senior portraits, ball, prom, boat cruise, and sports pictures, newspaper clippings, and, of course, her yearly traditional photo of her classes, all surrounding the title “Biologists of the 90’s.” On part of the back wall is a bookshelf, packed with all kinds of science books and magazines. The bulletin board in the front is crowded with cards, letters, certificates, ribbons, science-related comic strips, a Darwin fish, and a bunch of buttons—including one humongous one with the word “whining” with a thick red line through it.

In observing Ms. Kittay teaching and in having had her as a teacher for an entire year, I can say that she is clearly one of the best teachers at El Cerrito High. While observing her teaching style, three words came to my mind: organized, structured, and thorough. There is not one aspect of this teacher that gives away anything but the appearance of being extremely well put-together. The way a teacher dresses certainly says something about her personality, and consequently, her teaching ability. Ms. Kittay’s organized and thoughtful appearance shows that she is conscientious and serious about teaching.

Class begins at 8:15—sharp. Ms. Kittay puts the warm-up question on the overhead, reads it to the class, and asks them to answer it.

“Please be a little earlier,” she says to a student who has come in late. A few minutes later, she goes over the answer to the warm-up. She then goes over the agenda for the day so that all of the students know what’s going on. After the warm-up, the students take a ten-minute vocabulary quiz. The room is silent. The class is made up of twenty-nine students, all juniors and seniors. There are twenty-two girls and seven boys. She makes sure that everyone has enough time to finish the quiz, and then collects them, telling the students that she will return them the next day, a sure sign of a dedicated teacher.

Ms. Kittay asks the class to take out their homework. The students listen. She goes over each answer thoroughly, at one point putting up a transparency to illustrate a point. Despite its being first block, most of the students seem to be paying attention, looking through their books and taking notes.

“Rachel, what’s the difference between endocrine and exocrine glands?” Rachel responds hesitantly. “Well, that’s a good guess, but not exactly. Trigere, could you help her out?” Trigere helps her out with the correct answer. The homework is now finished being corrected, the students pass their papers to the front.

Ms. Kittay begins a lecture on connective tissue. She puts notes on the overhead. The class copies as she explains them. But soon enough, the notes are finished too, and it’s time for the next activity: histology posters.

“You can get information from you textbook, you can use the computers. Make a good poster. Okay, come on up and get your materials.” Suddenly virtually all of the seats are empty and there is a long line of kids waiting to get markers and paper. Most of the students begin working on their posters, some silently, others talking together as they

draw muscle and skin cells. And a few others are “taking a break” before they start the poster. But soon enough everyone is working, the word “histology” colorfully written twenty-nine times. Even though Ms. Kittay is not looking at or talking to her students, she is always listening.

“How do you spell ‘epithelial’?” a student asks another.

“Don’t misspell “epithelial,” she warns, jutting into the conversation like a knife. She spells the word for him

Everything is extremely systematic in this class; every assignment has a set number of points. Everything adds up so you know exactly what grade you got and why. Is there any system fairer than this?

Even before class is over, Ms. Kittay begins neatly writing the next day’s lesson plan on the board.

“Okay, ladies and gentlemen. We need to clean up now so please return your materials to the front.” She goes over the lesson plan for the next day and asks them if there are any questions. None. “Great,” she says. “Please wait for the bell. Don’t line up at the door.” She makes sure the rows of desks are straight before the students leave. The bell rings, and the students file out.

Physiology, block 1: the epitome of thorough teaching.