

To: Jessica Berman, Chair, English Department
From: Lucille McCarthy, Professor of English
Date: March 28, 2009
Re: Observation of Dr. Helen Burgess's Teaching

In early March, 2009, Dr. Helen Burgess, an Assistant Professor of English, invited me to observe a class session of English 300, "Text and Contexts," a course that introduces students to the Communications and Technology track. Dr. Burgess is teaching this course for the first time and is testing it as a possible addition to our core curriculum. The class is fully enrolled with twenty-five undergraduates, nineteen of whom attended on the day I observed.

The English 300 objectives for students are described in Professor Burgess's syllabus as threefold: (1) To learn how texts are produced and circulated in different settings, (2) to think about the ways we are embedded in a textual universe, and (3) to think about the ways we combine text, speech, and image to produce meaning.

Class Content and Pedagogical Strategies

Even before attending the class, I was impressed by Dr. Burgess's syllabus, which describes a rich array of readings and thought-provoking writing assignments as well as extensive use of a class website for teacher and student interactions. This website, one that Helen believes is superior to Blackboard and runs on her own server, is an important feature of the course. It provides the forum for an ongoing, on-line conversation in which students post responses to assigned readings by midnight the day before each class session. Helen then reads their comments and refines her lectures accordingly. Finally, after each class meeting, Helen posts her lecture notes on the website so students can refer to them as needed.

My actual classroom experience was inspiring. When I arrived, I felt as if I were entering a conversation-in-progress, which, in retrospect, is not surprising given the constant exchanges taking place among class members on the web. Students were chatting with one another, and, when Professor Burgess walked into the room, several students spoke to and laughed with her. These students were, Helen told me later, describing their frustrated efforts to fulfill a challenging assignment she had given them: Try to spend an entire day without reading any texts. Their papers describing their experiences were due the following period.

The class I attended focused on the rhetorical analysis of texts, one of several analytic approaches that students learn about in the course. Helen's objective is to introduce students to concepts from classical rhetoric--including ethos, pathos, and logos, forensic, epideictic, and

deliberative rhetoric; exordium, refutatio, narratio, confirmatio, and peroration--and then give them chances to apply these concepts in pieces of persuasive writing. The content and level of sophistication of the lesson was appropriate for an introductory class.

Professor Burgess's pedagogy is an effective blend of several approaches: lecture, workshop, and whole group discussion, all with the objective of helping students make discoveries for themselves. Before class began, students were required to read a chapter from their textbook on rhetorical analysis as well as a three-page essay from *The Economist* that argued for legalizing drugs. They had responded to these pieces on-line. When class began, Helen presented a twenty-minute lecture that supplemented their reading. As she spoke, she emphasized her major points by typing them on a lectern computer that projected overhead. When her brief lecture concluded, Dr. Burgess transformed the classroom into a workshop, pairing students and asking them to apply rhetorical concepts to the essay from *The Economist*. She handed out paper copies of this essay to all students. Then, for what was, in my view, a long time--thirty minutes--students engaged with this task, talking to one another as they reread the essay and tried out their newly acquired rhetorical lenses. Helen circulated among the pairs during this period, working with one group after another in a supportive fashion. For the final twenty minutes of the class meeting, Dr. Burgess brought everyone back together for whole-group discussion so that students could report their conclusions and hear from their classmates. Overall, because of Helen's careful preparation, skillful teaching, and caring manner, I came away feeling that her students and she had engaged in a multi-faceted, shared inquiry.

Classroom Climate and Relationships

The classroom climate was easy-going but seriously focused on the material, and nearly all nineteen students were on task for the entire period. Throughout the lesson, it was clear to me that teacher and students liked and trusted one another. Further, they all seemed to share an understanding of and commitment to the day's objectives. There was nodding and positive body language from students, laughter, and plenty of talk and cooperative input at all points during the class. The interpersonal connection that I observed between Dr. Burgess and her students is, in my view, the result of students' recognition that Helen is deeply interested in the issues that they are exploring in the course. Further, I believe they also recognize that she cares about them and their learning and that she has worked hard to organize a challenging and thought-provoking curriculum.