

Class Visit Report

Instructor: Elizabeth Ann Bryant Richards Class: WRD 103
Date: October 27, 2010 Location: Lewis 1508 (Loop)
Reporter: Eileen Seifert, Associate Director of First Year Writing

Elizabeth Ann Bryant Richards opened the class with a review of upcoming assignments and due dates. She asked students to look over their reading response papers one more time before handing them in and reminded them about their peer review for the next class.

The class was working on narratives, and the reading for the day was Charles Bowden's "Torch Song," an essay about his experience as a reporter who is covering stories of sexual abuse. Bowden tells not only the stories of those caught in this web but also writes about his own painful and destructive journey as a writer of these stories.

Bryant Richards started the discussion by asking for general impressions of the essay. Students found the essay disturbing but interesting. Bryant Richards modeled procedures of rhetorical analysis in the conversation. When a student said that the material was "gross," Bryant Richards asked him to isolate some of the details that produced the reaction. A student said that she didn't believe the story could be true, and Bryant-Richards asked if she had marked the relevant passages in the text. As the discussion progressed, it was clear that Bryant-Richards knew her students by name and that she listened carefully to their ideas and worked from their responses.

She asked the class to focus on the intended audience for this piece and to think about the position of a writer whose subject is something no one wants to talk about or read. The students came up with the idea that the essay was unlikely to help its victims, but that writing it may have helped the author to deal with a world where the predator and the prey sometimes switch roles. She asked them to talk about the tone of the piece and about Bowden's authority as a writer.

At this point the discussion had gone on for almost an hour. The essay was long and complex and there was plenty to talk about, but it was not clear where the discussion was going. Half of the room was deeply engaged and highly vocal. Another half of the room was quiet, though attentive.

Then Bryant Richards asked the students what the title, "Torch Song" meant. They didn't know. She played a clip of the song "Cry Me a River" and explained the torch song genre. At this point, some of the quieter students entered the conversation. They could relate to the song with a confidence that they didn't bring to the reading. Bryant Richards asked them why the essay was difficult, "What words did you have to look up?"

As the last quarter hour approached, Bryant Richards told her students that they had done a great job of reading and asked them if they could imagine why she assigned "Torch Song." One

student said that this level of darkness pushed them out of their comfort zones and inspired them to do real analysis. Another student noticed that the assignment showed them a narrative that wasn't arranged chronologically. Bryant Richards said that she hoped they would think about all the rhetorical choices that Bowden made and realize that they were making choices as writers all the time. She asked them if they felt they had been in similar territory with other readings, but they were thinking more about movies: *Fight Club*, *Clockwork Orange*, and *Zodiac*.

It was heartening to see students working for an extended period of time to analyze a text and to see them discovering for themselves major aspects of rhetorical analysis. Bowden's relentless and baroque style left a deep impression about the power of writing. At the same time, he is very far from the kind of writing that first year writing aims to develop. Although a great reporter, he writes in a mode that is clearly literary non-fiction. As a way to accomplish certain goals, this reading no doubt has its place. It seems important to use such writing carefully and to make explicit links to the writing goals of the students. I hope that the balance of writing and reading in the class points students in a direction more closely allied with the program goals. With this point taken, though, it was good to see student taking on a challenging reading and finding themselves up to the task.