

Visit Report

Instructor: Beth Ann Bryant-Richards

Visitor: Eileen Seifert

Date: January 17, 2008

Beth Ann Bryant Richards opened her WRD 104 class by taking roll and introducing the University Center for Writing consultant whom she had invited to give a presentation on the center's services. The consultant told the students how to connect with the center and she explained the range of in-person and online help available. Bryant Richards then gave an unannounced reading quiz on the day's assignment. The quiz consisted of ten straightforward, fact-based questions, and students were prepared and wrote busily. During this class session, the students were finishing Tobias Wolff's account of his Vietnam experience, *In Pharaoh's Army*.

Before turning to the reading, Bryant Richards went over the upcoming Research Proposal assignment. She had a multipage handout and prefaced the discussion with the comment that "we've already read and learned a lot." This positive tone about the students' work and accomplishments persisted throughout the session. Students were supposed to find a research topic that connected to their class readings on Vietnam, though they were not limited to that conflict. Bryant Richards emphasized finding topics that truly interested them. The students got guidelines about doing preliminary research to explore topics and advice on possible sources. The class also went over the printed grading criteria that were attached to the assignment sheet. She talked to them about less obvious sources and alluded to work they would be doing with podcasts and e-reserves in the coming weeks. She asked them to email their topics to her by Saturday noon, and said, "This is the exciting beginning!"

The students then pulled their chairs into a "discussion circle" to discuss their responses to Part III of Wolff's book. The students were working with a discussion handout and also had their written responses to Part II. She called on students by name, rather than waiting for volunteers, and they were able to respond. Many of them made use of their highlighted and annotated books. As students made comments, Bryant-Richards asked them to locate the sections in the reading that inspired their reactions. They clearly had a classroom practice of locating the passage, sharing the page number, and rereading as a preface to their discussion. Although this scrupulous attention to text was the order of the day, she also made room for personal reactions by telling a few stories of her own family and encouraging students to do the same. She also had stocked Blackboard with a rich mix of text and images to give the discussion context. From time to time, she asked them to dig a bit deeper to locate the tone and underlying themes of Wolff's analysis of the events of his tour of duty. At the very end of the class, she asked them if they had thought about the reference in the book's title. This was clearly a new idea. Finally, a very quiet student who had not been vocal in the discussion volunteered that she did not know much about Vietnam, but she did do Bible Study, and wondered if Wolff was referring to Moses and Egypt. It was one of those Eureka moments. The class saw that Wolff was placing his country not on the heroic side of the Israelites but on the doomed side of the Egyptians who were about to be swallowed by the Red Sea. And he did it by an allusion! A palpable ripple of interest ran through the room. On that high note, class ended as Bryant Richards passed back a set of papers.