

Course Observation--Beth Ann Bryant-Richards
WRD 202 (2/17/09)
Submitted by Melinda Turnley

I observed Beth Ann as she taught her 11:50-1:20 section of WRD 202 in Lewis 1213; this was the third class meeting of the second session of the term . Prior to the class meeting, she provided me with her course syllabus and schedule and a copy of her career plan assignment. At the time of my visit, students were working on their résumés and career plans, which were due during the next class meeting on February 19th. The activities for the class period I visited focused on peer review for this assignment, a quiz, and a discussion of document design.

The class meeting on the whole was successful. The students were actively engaged, and Beth Ann managed time effectively. She maintained a good balance among individual, group, and full class work and did a good job of framing activities in relation to programmatic and course goals. Beth Ann was already in the room before class began and comfortably talking with some of the students about topics such as an upcoming internship fair. She started class at 11:50 by taking attendance and asking students if they had questions about the assigned reading from Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* before beginning their scheduled quiz. One student asked about who/whom usage, a topic which wasn't in the assigned reading, and another student asked about semicolons. Though Strunk and White provide useful information about grammar and style, Beth Ann could consider also assigning a textbook that also explicitly addresses rhetorical issues related to workplace contexts.

After discussing students' questions about the readings, Beth Ann explained the procedures for the quiz, the first one of the course. She asked students to spread out with at least one seat between them. Once students were re-situated, Beth Ann handed out copies of the quiz, which consisted of 21 questions plus extra credit. Eight of the questions focused on Strunk and White's backgrounds and the forward to the book; nine questions focused on applying rules about commas and possessives; two questions asked students to rewrite sentences; and the last two questions asked the students draw and label the rhetorical triangle and define rhetoric. At about 12:15, Beth Ann collected the quizzes and said that she would return them graded during the next class.

Beth Ann then transitioned to a discussion of document design. She projected a PowerPoint slide show on the screen that was devoted to issues of typography, graphics, color, and page layout. She did a nice job of contextualizing her introduction of these issues in relation to students work on their own résumés. In her introduction, she suggested that design has nothing to do with content, that it functions only as an enhancement to how information is presented. To underscore the significance of design, an alternate framing could be useful. Instead of presenting form as simply an add on to content, she could consider how, in good design, form and content are two sides of the same rhetorical coin, working together to effectively communicate information to particular audiences. Beth Ann, in fact, implied this sort of contextualized form/content relationship in her discussion by highlighting issues such as cultural interpretations of color. So, employing this framework would just be a matter of emphasizing up front the ways in which form and content are rhetorically embedded.

To reinforce concepts from her lecture, Beth Ann provided examples of document design. She passed around a mailer/flyer, a small poster, and the DePaulia. For each artifact, she asked students to discuss how they responded to its design, considering both strengths and weaknesses. After discussing these print-based genres, Beth Ann displayed examples of poorly designed web sites with distracting backgrounds and overly dense layouts. To help students solidify their understanding of design principles, having them participate in an extended assessment of these examples could be productive. For example, students could work in small groups to apply specific design concepts to one of the examples and then share their findings with the class. They could consider principles such as typography, graphics, color, alignment, white space, contrast, consistency, etc. Applying these ideas to examples could help students develop their design vocabularies and better apply these concepts to their own compositions. Further, discussing more explicitly how design choices vary across media also could bolster students' understandings of design.

At about 12:40, to finish up the discussion of document design, Beth Ann referred back to the previous class's discussion of scannable résumés. She directed students to resources on the course Blackboard site that could assist them if they needed to create unformatted versions of their résumés. Additionally, she prompted students to take out the hard copies of their résumés which they had brought to class. She then asked students to fold their résumés in half twice to create visible quadrants on the page. Beth Ann presented this as a useful method for assessing the balance of their page layouts, emphasizing that the most important information should go in the top left-hand section.

Beth Ann then transitioned students into the peer review portion of the class. She distributed a peer response form from McGraw Hill to guide students responses to their peers' career plan papers and directed students to write feedback directly on the résumés. While pairs worked on their peer responses, Beth Ann circulated providing feedback on each student's résumé. Through the activity, students remained focused and worked quietly on the assigned tasks. When students asked for a clarification about the assignment instructions, Beth Ann was attentive and quickly responded. Beth Ann provided encouragement and constructive suggestions regarding both form and content when she spoke to the students sitting near me.

Around 1:11, Beth Ann brought students' attention back to the full group. She quickly provided students with a few pieces of information to help with their résumés. She showed them how to change the default margins in Microsoft Word, referred them to resources about action verbs on the Blackboard site, and cautioned about posting personal information in online résumés. She then projected ahead to Thursday's class, reminding students that the final drafts of their career plans and résumés would be due. She offered to provide additional feedback on students' résumés via email prior to this deadline. She dismissed the class a little early at 1:15 but continued to answer questions from individual students as the group began to pack up and leave.

As I indicated above, overall the class went well. Beth Ann had a good rapport with students and remained on task. The topics for the meeting were effectively focused on résumé development and reflective of goals for WRD 202. The suggestions discussed above, therefore, are framed as enhancements to an already well-focused approach.