

This teaching observation functions toward the development of a teaching portfolio.

- First, it acts as another layer of reflection upon a specific lesson plan.
- Second, it represents another document for a teacher to reflect upon.
- Third, it begins to make links to the specific contexts in which a teacher works.

This observation is the beginning of building "*copia*" for a rhetorically situated teaching portfolio. (This observation might not ever be presented in a formally constructed portfolio.)

Observation
ENG 101, Fall 1998
September 21, 1998

This is the first observation report from ENG101, Fall 1998.

I scanned the following observation report onto the computer, there may remain a few computer typos and misreadings of the original document.

To: xxxxxx xxxxx, Director of Composition

From: xxxxxx xxxxx, xxxxx

Cc: Shelley Rodrigo, Teaching Assistant; xxxxxx xxxxx, 101 Coordinator

Re: Observation of Shelley Rodrigo

Date: September 23, 1998

Overview

On September 21, 1998, I attended Shelley Rodrigo's 10:40 section of English 101 and observed her performance as a teacher. Prior to that date, I met with her in my office to talk about her plans for the day I was scheduled to attend. She provided me with her lesson plan for the day. In particular, I asked her to talk about any concerns that she had, and she indicated that as a new teacher she was interested in my taking note of performance as a facilitator of classroom discussion. That is, she has been searching for more strategies and is concerned that she not unintentionally "shoot them [students] down" when they make contributions to conversation. Corollary to that concern, Shelley is looking for more ways to engage students so that they "get their problems out on the table for discussion." She also indicated that she worries about how to get everything done in the 50-minute class format. Accordingly, these concerns focused much of my attention during the observation.

Observation Notes

Shelley arrived a couple of minutes early. Before class officially began, she updated me with a new lesson plan for the class for the day. She indicated that she needed to make adjustments to her lesson plan after her experience in her earlier 7:40 class. She also put the homework on the board and the prompt for writing at the beginning of class.

While waiting for two missing students, one student asked Shelley if she had her stapler with her, and she responded that she had left it upstairs. Another student asked an unrelated (to class) question and there was some brief discussion. Shelley commented that we're still "one person shy." If I understand correctly, what happened, we waited for both students to arrive, delaying the beginning of class by five minutes. The second student did not show before class actually began.

At 10:45, Shelley began the writing prompt assignment. They all seemed to know what to do with very little direction and immediately turned to writing. While students wrote, Shelley wrote also.

At 10:50 the missing student arrived. Shelley had students stop writing. She held up her textbook and, indicated that she will "begin with the variation on 'my dog ate my homework,' indicating that her dog had chewed on her book. This elicited a student question, "Do you have a new dog?," which Shelley briefly answered. She turned to the day's activity, asking "How many of you read the assignment last night?" Some did not and she responded with, "That's okay, the handout will get you up to speed."

She asked them to take out their reflecting journals and use the handout she was passing out to respond. This was about the Remembered Event assignment that they were turning in. The handout was based on pp. 60-61 of the SMG. While they wrote, Shelley moved about the room looking at their folders. She checked her watch from time to time and gave them a 2-minute warning, urging them "to do the best they can with the time."

At 11:05, she asked them to wrap up. One student wanted to know what to do if she did not get to question #4. Shelley told her to turn in what she had and indicated that this was a time issue and that in the future they would do their reflection entry as a homework assignment that they would bring in with their final draft. She also asked them to write on item #5 as homework assignment that could be turned in anonymously (it asks about what activities in class were helpful and what was not) and that she would not read them, in any case, until she had finished grading their papers. She added that the reflecting journal would be important for the portfolio assignment at the end of class. This segment only took about 2 minutes.

Next, Shelley asked them "How did this assignment go for you?" There were a couple of responses about peer reviews being helpful and concern that there had not been enough time in class to complete the last one. Shelley responded that this was helpful feedback and that she would take their concerns into consideration when planning in the future. One student raised a question about having a problem with doing an outline for the paper and then "adding on" something about "significance." Shelley's response was, "Yes, I've been having a conversation with people in my office" and "they're all worried about getting papers with the story and then the significance tacked on." Another student raised a question about the Auster essay, asking "what did the title mean?" Shelley's response was "Yes, we didn't have time to discuss that," and there was some brief discussion of the topic.

Shelley then moved to a question for the whole class: "How many of you had to do invention work for the first time?" A number of hands went up. "Was it useful?" There were positive

responses. Shelley responded with something like, "Good ... you're learning new tools.... They will be helpful when you have to do that senior thesis." She picked up on some nonverbal from a couple of students and quickly added that she did not know if they actually had to do a senior thesis or not. Shelley then moved to how invention works for her, trying to emphasize how invention is recursive. She turned back to see if anybody had anything else to say about invention, commenting that "many of you are quiet." She then called on a student, commenting that she "was usually quiet." The student had to ask her to repeat the question but then contributed to the discussion. Several students contributed that being able to come in and talk to her had been useful in completing the assignment, and this led to a question about conferences.

(11:17) Shelley picked up on that comment as "a good transition to the next assignment." She passed out the Paper #2 assignment sheet and a Conference Preparation sheet. She asked for a volunteer to begin reading the prompt on the first handout. After a couple of paragraphs, she asked the class if the assignment sounded familiar, and in response to their nods of assent, she suggested that "we want to begin thinking about how they're different." She also indicated that this assignment would give them "more freedom to organize" and that they would talk more in class about that. She then asked them to read the backside of the handout on their own, pointing out some key issues, and that she would take their questions next time. Shelley assigned them groups for this assignment and suggested they swap e-mail and phone numbers.

(11:30) She passed around the sign up sheet for conference and emphasized the importance of showing up for conference since an absence would count three times against them. She also briefly discussed the content of the conferences and how to use the handout to prepare for it. There were a number of questions about preparation, and she quickly passed out the prompt for the Remembered Person assignment that would get them started before the conference occurred.

She then asked if there were any additional questions, which she answered. She asked them to turn in their papers for the day and dismissed them.

General Observations

Shelley is conscientious about making every effort to be responsive to and available to students. The atmosphere in the classroom was friendly and relaxed. She was organized, had a plan, and had updated it in view of results in her earlier class. It is also clear that students know what she expects them to do when they begin class with a writing prompt. There is a routine there that students have fallen comfortably into and are responsive to. She was also careful during the question and answer segment (following the reflection journal writing) to give encouragers ("good").

Suggestions

Given what Shelley had asked me to look for, one of the themes that emerged for me as an observer was about the way time and focus figure in her classroom. For instance, when asking students to wrap up what they were doing during the reflection journal writing, she gave them a "2-minutes warning" that they would have to stop soon, and it was after the activity that she elaborated what purpose it served. There were also questions from students about irrelevant issues. And, from student interaction, it appeared that they felt they had not had enough time to discuss the title of the Auster essay. On the other hand, there were two students late for whom

the class waited to begin. While not crucial individually, when taken together, these events suggest opportunities where Shelley can take action that will give her a greater sense of confidence in herself as a facilitator and classroom manager. My sense is that in her desire to avoid "shooting students down," she may not recognize as opportunities instances where she could take control of events in a purposeful way. Here are some possibilities:

Structure activities with a clear relationship between purpose, activity, and time. For instance, when setting up a writing, tell students in advance what purpose the activity serves, how long they have, and what they are to accomplish in that time. When they are about halfway through (say with a 20 min. writing), try asking them if they need closer to 5 minutes or 10 minutes to finish. The teacher can sometimes cut the time they need by setting up the activity in a sharply focused way and then asking the question this way. But if they need the full 20, the teacher will get a clear sense of that.

Don't wait on students who are late, even for 30 seconds. Shelley may want to more fully develop her opening 'routine.' That is, do the same things every class period at the beginning of class. For instance, come in 2 minutes before class, get organized, write on the board, close the door at 10:40 on the dot, and immediately start a writing prompt. If students come in after the writing period is over, they will get no credit for that day but they will also learn that being on time counts. This will also 'teach' a structure for action to students: by observing her, they will know when it is time to get to work and stop socializing.

Shelley may want to think about whether or not she wants to foreground the process by which she is making decisions about what happens in class, or irrelevant details, or if that is just a habit she has picked up. That is, is she sure she wants to tell her 10:40 class that the 7:40 class is a proving ground for her decisions about what to do in the 10:40 class? Sure that she wants to tell them that "I've been having a conversation with people in my office" about whether the significance thing is working? Sure that she wants to foreground her dog chewing on her book? By introducing these elements, she may sacrifice the focus that she has worked so hard to create elsewhere. Let the 10:40 students think she is a smart cookie. They don't have to know that she figured out a better lesson plan because something went wrong in an earlier class. And she doesn't have to tell them that she is aware of their concern about significance because she and her officemates are worried about how it's going. If she stays focused on her purpose at every moment, so will they, and they will be less likely to bring up irrelevant items.

Shelley may also want to think about whether she really wants to provide her students with a stapler or let them off the hook when they come unprepared. On the one hand, providing them a stapler is a nurturing and helpful act, but on the other, it may encourage them to continue relying on her for practices that they should be taking responsibility for themselves. This is an incredibly small detail, but when teachers communicate in as many ways as possible that students are to be responsible for themselves and their own learning, they are more likely to persist with her about more important issues, like "What *does* Auster mean by his title?" And, she may want to be more careful about communicating that doing the reading is a matter of choice (because she will bail them out with a good handout) rather than a responsibility.

Shelley may want to rethink her lesson plan in terms of relation between purpose and activity. I know that in the training workshop, the emphasis was on having a list of activities and being prepared for them, but *she* may need to carefully structure what purpose each activity, including the questions she asks, serves. This would not only help her feel more focused and in control of the classroom, but students will know, even if only intuitively, that what they are doing is purposeful and not desultory. In other words, in the later segment of class where she asked them about doing invention and how the paper assignment went, what exactly was she up to? What instructional goal was she after? How could she have talked concretely about the significance of the "tools" they were developing without the misspeaking of a "senior thesis" project? If she has articulated that in advance, she will know exactly what she has to accomplish in the time frame available and is more likely to meet her goals given the time available.

Overall Comments

On the whole, what I observed in Shelley's classroom is that she is a committed and enthusiastic teacher. The suggestions I have made are just that—she may find more productive ways to address the questions I raise here. And at any rate, Shelley's greatest obstacle is that she doesn't have years of experience to fall back on, something time alone can cure. In our follow-up conversation to the observation, she had already identified some of these issues as areas to work on and in fact, had experienced some success with applying some of what she is doing in the TA practicum to these issues. From what I observed on this one occasion, Shelley is where she ought to be as a new teacher.