

To: Jessica Berman, Chair, English Department
From: Lucille McCarthy, Professor of English
Date: March 31, 2012
Re: Observation of Dr. Helen Burgess's Teaching

In early March, 2012, Dr. Helen Burgess, an assistant professor of English, invited me to observe her English 300 course, "Communication and Technology: Analysis of Texts and Contexts." I was particularly pleased to do so for two reasons. First, I had observed Dr. Burgess teaching this same course three years ago. At that time she was a newcomer to UMBC, and it was her first time teaching the course. I believed that watching her teach it again, three years later, would give me insight into her development. Second, I was eager observe a section of English 300 since it is now required of all English majors. This class, which is an introduction to the Communication and Technology (CT) track, was previously taken as an elective and, for the most part, only by CT track majors. Now, however, English 300 is required for all literature as well as CT track majors.

The section I observed has 27 students on its roster who range widely in level: one freshman, ten sophomores, eleven juniors, and five seniors. However, nearly all (23) are English majors and are divided evenly between CT and Lit tracks. The other majors represented are Media and Communication Studies (2), history (1), and business (1). What I saw in my observation reveals that Professor Burgess, although already a fine teacher in 2009, is even better now in 2012.

Course Objectives

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

Required Reading and Writing

Required reading includes articles that Dr. Burgess provides as well as selections from two textbooks: *What Writing Does and How It Does It* (Bazerman and Prior, Eds.) and *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age* (Levy). For every reading assignment, students are required to write a response and post it to the class website before class starts. Helen reads their responses before going to class and adjusts her plans accordingly.

In addition to frequent written responses to reading, Professor Burgess assigns three major papers, each of which requires significant empirical and/or archival research. For these

papers, Dr. Burgess outlines her grading criteria clearly, first on the syllabus and again on the assignment sheet. This is one place where I saw growth in Helen's teaching. Over time she has become more explicit about her expectations of student work. Now, because students know exactly how they will be evaluated, there are fewer instances of confusion or controversy over grades.

Class Content and Pedagogical Strategies

In the class I observed, students and teacher engaged in an ongoing inquiry into the nature of texts and documents, an investigation that students clearly understood and found engaging. This particular session was a pivotal one in which teacher and students turned their attention from "texts" to "documents," working to define the distinction between these categories. The class conversation built upon papers that students had recently submitted about texts in their lives and their efforts to spend a day without interacting with any of them (impossible for many students). The conversation also built upon the day's reading from Levy's textbook about the nature of documents. Professor Burgess told students, "Today we will explore what is a text and what is not, what is a document and what is not. We'll find out what Levy's theory is all about." This session prepared students for their upcoming "document analysis" paper as well as for next week's class trip to the library to learn new research methods.

Professor Burgess's pedagogy in this class session was a fine example what I call a "co-investigator" approach with her students. It is a teaching stance that shows that Helen has indeed become, in the three years since I last observed her, a more confident teacher. This co-investigator approach is challenging because the teacher and students together explore questions that the teacher introduces but for which she has no definite, preconceived answers. Rather, she must follow students' leads, listening carefully to what they say and deciding which leads to pick up on and which to let go. Helen explained, "I don't lecture now like I used to. Rather, I try to get students to lecture for me by posing questions and then letting them do the intellectual work." This is exactly what happened. For the entire 75 minutes, nearly all of the 23 students who attended that day were engaged, sixteen of them contributing at least once and the others listening and watching attentively.

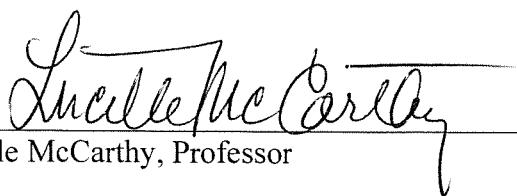
This class discussion was successful not only because of students' preparedness and the shared inquiry approach but also because of Dr. Burgess's decision to focus on students' own documents. She had asked them to bring in documents that "do work" and "have meaning for you personally." Helen told me that at the start of the semester students seemed to prefer talking about published material. However, over time, they have become increasingly interested in their own thinking and writing and in the documents that shape their lives. The first student to offer his document for analysis held up his marriage certificate. After discussing it for about ten minutes, the class undertook an analysis of Helen's green card. She handed it to a student in the front row who examined it and told the class what she was seeing. Helen responded appreciatively, jotting students' points on the chalkboard. Following the green card, the class analyzed a student's provisional driver's license, someone's speeding ticket, a blood donor card, a student's paycheck for \$25.00, a Kindle with a novel on it, and several more. The interest of students was, understandably, high as they worked together to analyze these documents, trying to

figure out what makes it a document rather than a text, who authored it and for what ends, what stories it tells, what history it builds on, and what work it accomplishes.

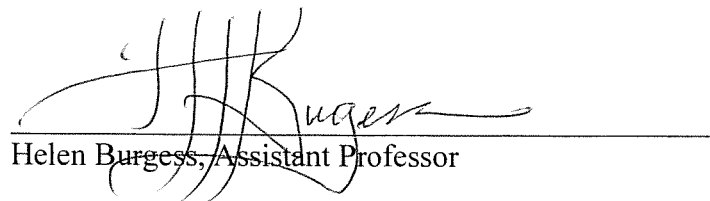
Classroom Climate and Relationship

The conjoint inquiry I observed could not have happened without a high level of trust in the classroom. It is clear that Professor Burgess knows and likes her students and is encouraging to them. Several times she referred to what a student had said in a previous class session or, once, in a previous course he had taken with her. There was a good deal of laughter during this session, and on three occasions students engaged in “cross talk,” responding to one another without teacher mediation. At one point, a student actually left her seat and went to the front of the class and asked Professor Burgess for the chalk. This student then drew the icon from her document on the chalkboard, smiling and talking, obviously confident that she could help Helen explain it to the class. And students followed their classmate’s explication with interest. I found this to be an impressive example of John Dewey’s ideal student-teacher relationship, one in which students and teacher exchange roles unselfconsciously, teaching and learning from one another.

At the end of the class, the young woman who was sitting next to me, a student who had been attentive during class but never volunteered, spoke to me. She asked, “How did you like the class?” I said fine, and then I asked her about her experiences in English 300. She seemed eager to tell me how much she liked the unusual assignments, especially the “day without texts” paper and a web autobiography she referred to as a “googleography.” These gave her, she said, new perspectives on things she’d never thought about before. As she and I walked together to the Fine Arts building, this young woman said that another good part of the class is that she feels “supported” by the materials Dr. Burgess puts on the website. These include Helen’s own reading notes, which she posts after each class discussion. This student concluded with a smile, “I feel like Dr. Burgess always has my back.”



Lucille McCarthy, Professor



Helen Burgess, Assistant Professor