

# Memorandum

To: Dr. Kelli Cargile Cook

From: Laura Vernon

Re: Utah State University Classroom Observation Report

Date: April 6, 2006

---

## Introduction

On Monday, February 27, 2006, I visited the classroom of Dr. Cheryl Ball, an assistant professor of computers and writing in the English Department at Utah State University in Logan, Utah. She teaches English 5430: Professional Writing Capstone to 13 graduating seniors. The class meets on Mondays from 1:30 to 4 p.m. in a computer classroom. Technical and professional writing undergraduate majors are required to take this three-credit-hour course. The course prepares students to enter the workplace.

As an instructor-in-training, I visited the class to observe Dr. Ball's instruction techniques, the students' responses and activities, and the teaching environment. To prepare for my observation, I met with Dr. Ball and reviewed her syllabus. After the observation, I met with her again to debrief. The purpose of this memo is to report my observations.

In the report that follows, I will introduce you to Dr. Ball, describe the capstone course objectives and requirements, analyze the syllabus and course curriculum, describe what happened the day I observed Dr. Ball's class, and conclude with what I learned from my observations.

## Context and Observations

In this section, I will describe Dr. Ball's background and teaching philosophy; the purpose, objectives, and curriculum of the capstone course; the students I observed; and the teaching environment.

### ***Instructor Description***

Dr. Cheryl Ball has been teaching at Utah State University since 2004. She specializes in new media studies, which merges composition studies (including visual rhetoric) and design. Dr. Ball describes herself as a "compositionist who does design work." Spring 2006 is her first semester teaching the capstone course.

Dr. Ball has a PhD in Rhetoric and Technical Communication from Michigan Technological University (2005), an MFA in Poetry from Virginia Commonwealth University (2000), and a

bachelor's degree in Creative Writing from Old Dominion University (1996). She has nine years of teaching experience.

Dr. Ball likes project-based courses and smaller assignments that build up to a major project. She describes herself as a “hands-on” instructor. She likes students to have time in class to work on their assignments. She describes her classroom as student centered. She values student feedback and encourages students to actively participate in discussions. She considers herself an easy grader, but her assessment standard is on target. For example, she expects students to submit professional-quality work, and she grades accordingly. For her, it's also important for students to progress and think critically about their work.

As an instructor, Dr. Ball knows that students don't accept what she says *carte blanche*. “I have to remind them why they are here and make learning fit what they want to get out of it.” She also knows that students need to apply what they learn. “I keep them focused on what the real world is like and encourage them to figure out what they want to do.” She realizes that not all students have the same goals in mind, so she takes the time to understand their needs and tailor assignments to meet those needs. For example, some of her capstone students are moving on to graduate school, so she is helping those students develop portfolios for graduate admissions rather than for the workplace.

### **Course Description**

Professional Writing Capstone is a required course for undergraduate majors in technical and professional writing. Seniors take the course the last semester before graduation. The course helps students develop their identity as a professional writer in the workplace. To prepare students to enter the workplace, students create cover letters, resumes, and a portfolio (print and web). Students learn job-search and interview strategies. They participate in a mock job interview. They consider how the organization they will join may influence the way they work and write as well as how they may, in return, influence the organization.

During the semester, students meet the following objectives:

- Review current publications about working as a professional communicator
- Learn strategies for analyzing and critiquing professional and technical writing
- Develop skills for representing yourself in varied job-searching and review situations

In addition to the course objectives listed above, students also meet the following programmatic objectives:

- Design documents for legibility/professional appeal
- Reflect on past writing/communication experiences
- Create digital and print portfolios

On the day of my observation, all 13 students attended the class. There were three males and 10 females. Students met in a computer classroom. They sat in front of or worked at computers placed on top of tables pushed against three walls of the room in a “u” shape. Most students turned their backs to the computers and faced forward when Dr. Ball was instructing or when the video was playing. Most students were actively engaged. For example, they answered Dr. Ball's questions, made comments, and asked questions. They listened to other students speak. When

asked, they helped each other with their projects during the workshop. However, from time to time, a few students found the computers too tempting and checked email or wrote quick email messages. Some students turned their attention to the computers during Dr. Ball's budget presentation and toward the end of the video on interviewing. Dr. Ball said that she doesn't mind if students check their email while she's talking. She feels that students these days are adept at multitasking. In her opinion, they can listen and work on the computer at the same time.

Dr. Ball does not like the configuration of the computer classroom. She says it is too crowded and too small. There are too many computers and not enough table space. And the computer furniture is not ergonomic. The conference table is new, but it's too big for the room. However, it helps facilitate better collaboration. Despite its size, the room allows instructors to see what students are doing on the computers and to walk around and help. The room also allows instructors to teach using a projection screen on the fourth wall of the room where there are no computers. Students can easily swivel their chairs around to see a presentation or work on the computer. The close proximity of students to each other allows students to help each other. The drawback is that students don't have much table room for books and papers.

### ***Curriculum/Syllabus Analysis***

The syllabus for the capstone course is organized according to weekly topics. Most weeks, Dr. Ball and the students prepare to discuss certain topics such as reading job ads, creating resumes and cover letters, choosing documents and designing the portfolio, networking, interviewing, and joining the workforce. Other weeks, students participate in an activity or workshop. For example, students participate in a mock job interview, alumni panel discussion, academic electronic portfolio critique, and several portfolio workshops.

In the capstone class, students are required to write reading responses, participate in class discussions, work as a computer lab consultant for three hours every week, analyze three job ads and then produce three versions of their resume and a single cover letter, participate in a mock job interview and then analyze their strengths and weaknesses, and, finally, produce two portfolios: a professional, print-based, interviewing portfolio and an electronic academic portfolio.

Dr. Ball posts the required readings online using Syllabase. These readings include journal articles, web sites links, and professional newsletter articles. She also requires students to have a high-quality binder (for the portfolio) and display materials for documents in the binder, two CD-Rs for the electronic portfolio, and portfolio samples from previous courses. Additionally, Dr. Ball expects students to have word-processing, publication production, and web development capabilities; the ability to teach others to enhance these capabilities; and an email account, Internet access, and server space (school or personal) for their electronic portfolio. Dr. Ball gives students the option of joining the Society for Technical Communication.

Dr. Ball uses a variety of instructional methods. She likes to give students time to work on their assignments during class. Workshops are common, especially at the end of the semester when students are finalizing their portfolios. Dr. Ball also lectures; facilitates class discussions; conducts electronic tutorials; uses electronic discussion posts, videos, the Internet, and class

activities; organizes field trips to Career Services; and invites members of the technical communication community to run the mock job interviews.

Students learn all six literacies in Dr. Ball's capstone class. Students build basic literacy by reading assigned articles and writing responses to those readings. They build rhetorical literacy by developing audience-specific resumes, selecting portfolio pieces for certain audiences, preparing for a mock job interview, and working as a computer lab consultant. They build social literacy by networking with alumni, working in the lab, and participating in workshops and discussions. They build technological literacy by using word-processing, publication production, and web development software; the Internet; email; and Syllabase. Their consulting work in the lab also builds technological literacy. Students build ethical literacy by producing professional-quality work, exercising academic and professional honesty, and following computer use laws and policies. Students build critical literacy by posting in Syllabase what they did during a lab consultation, writing critical-thinking responses to the readings, self-analyzing their mock job interview performance, and writing a reflective memo to Dr. Ball about their portfolio.

Dr. Ball uses several technical communication theories to support her instruction. For example, students apply rhetorical theory by finding three ads for jobs and using the content of the ads to develop three resumes. Students apply cognitive theory and visual rhetorical theory by following good text design principles in their memos, resumes, and cover letters. Students apply social theory by participating in peer review and helping each other during workshops. Students apply workplace/situated learning theory by working in the lab and developing resumes for jobs for which they want to apply. Students apply genre theory by producing memos, resumes, cover letters, and portfolios. Students apply usability theory by having their work reviewed by peers and Dr. Ball.

Dr. Ball gives each assignment a point value. The total points a student can earn in 1,000. Students must turn in all major assignments to pass the course. Dr. Ball uses the following scale to determine the final grade:

- A = 900-1,000 points
- B = 800-899 points
- C = 700-799 points
- D = 600-699 points
- F = 599 or fewer points

Formative evaluation occurs throughout the semester and with almost every assignment. For example, Dr. Ball provides at least two opportunities for students to review and revise their resumes and cover letter. Dr. Ball also meets with students one-on-one to review their portfolio selections and give advice on any selections that may need to be revised. Students have about four portfolio review and revision sessions. To prepare to the mock job interview, students role play and provide feedback to each other. After the interview, Dr. Ball debriefs with the students. Students then write, review, and revise a self-analysis of their performance. Students also write, review, and revise their reflective memo.

The portfolio is the major summative evaluation piece. All assignments have a deadline, at which point they are evaluated. Dr. Ball provides narrative comments. She also makes editing marks so that students can improve their writing.

### **Lesson Description**

I observed Dr. Ball's class on Monday, February 27, 2006, from 1:30 to 4 p.m. in a computer classroom. All 13 students attended the class. There were three males and 10 females. Networking and preparing for jobs interviews were the learning objectives for the day. The topics were introduced the week before and continued on the day of my observation.

Class started with one student inviting other students to attend a grant writing workshop that she had arranged with another professor in the English Department. Dr. Ball then opened class discussion by asking students about the alumni panel. She asked, "How many of you went to the panel? What did you learn? What did you leave from that experience still wanting to know?" Several students responded and were engaged in the discussion. For example, one student mentioned the story she heard from one panelist about networking. It reinforced what she had learned the week before. Dr. Ball gave the students the following advice: "The first job you get out of college is not the job you will have for the rest of your life." She then shared a personal experience. I observed that students were seeing how classroom assignments were applying to real life.

Dr. Ball spent about 20 minutes talking about the budget for the computer writing lab. Earlier in the semester, students complained about paying the \$35 per-course fee to use the lab. To help them better understand the need for the fee, Dr. Ball projected the lab budget on the screen and explained to the students how much it costs to operate the lab. She reviewed each line item for hardware and software. She talked to them about the politics of resource distribution and the difficulty in securing funds for what many perceived as an "invisible" and "undervalued" English department. By the end of her presentation, students had completely changed their attitude about the fee. They were not only in favor of the fee but also happy to pay more.

The students spent the next 35 minutes or so watching a video on interviewing that Dr. Ball borrowed from USU Career Services. But before Dr. Ball started the video, she passed out a list of common interview questions and encouraged students to write out answers to all the questions. Unfortunately, Dr. Ball did not have a chance to review the video before class. She was expecting a DVD but got a VHS instead. She asked students to learn from the video and critique it. While watching the video, a few students took notes. After the video, she opened class discussion again by asking students what they learned from the video. Several students responded. Again, Dr. Ball shared personal experiences, some of which were really funny.

For the last hour of class, students worked individually on their portfolios at the computers.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, I learned the following lessons from observing Dr. Ball and her capstone class:

- Make learning relevant. Find out what students want to get out of the class and then do what you can to make it happen. They will take ownership of their learning.

- Tell students when they are not performing at the expected professional level. Remind them that academic expectations emulate workplace expectations.
- Provide students with practical experience and opportunities that can help them build their resumes and portfolios. The lab consulting requirement is a great idea.
- Take time to teach important concepts that are not on the syllabus but are on the minds of students. The writing lab budget had nothing to do with capstone, but it taught students a reality most of them will encounter in the workplace.
- Don't take yourself too seriously. Have fun, but make sure students know you're the instructor. Students need to know you're human while at the same respecting the position you hold.
- Share relevant personal experiences with students when appropriate.

Three hours is long time to teach a class. I learned from Dr. Ball the value of breaking up the time into chunks of activities. On the day I observed, Dr. Ball had the students do about six activities in that three-hour period. Activities ranged from class discussions to presentations to a workshop. The workshop concerned me, though. Many students didn't take advantage of the time Dr. Ball had given them to work on their assignments. Many of them left really early. They also didn't take advantage of Dr. Ball as a resource. Dr. Ball wasn't bothered that students left class early. It was their choice. However, I wonder how to best use that time and motivate students to stay.

Dr. Ball also taught me that technical and professional writing students need plenty of practice writing and revising. I was impressed that she built into her syllabus many opportunities for students to revise their work. As a future technical writing teacher, I will follow this wise counsel.