

Lois Agnew
Teaching Observation Report: Jessica Corey
WRT 105
12:30-1:50 p.m.
11/10/15
Crouse-Hinds 003
18 students

Jessica Corey invited me to visit her 12:30 WRT 105 class on Tuesday, November 10. She sent me a copy of her syllabus with a general overview of her lesson plan in advance of the visit.

As the class began, Jessica invited the students to give her a written statement about the class on Thursday, including areas of confusion or areas where they need something more than they have received from the course so far. She stressed the fact that the statements can be anonymous.

She then turned to the first reading assignment for the day, "T-Shirts as Wearable Diary." She began by asking students to respond to the essay. One student immediately spoke up and said that the article was interesting and provided a perspective that he hadn't thought of before in relation to T-shirts. He said that he typically thinks of T-shirts from the standpoint of "something else to wear," but this article opens new ways of thinking about the function of T-shirts in forming social relationships. Jessica provided an example of an occasion from her own experience in which her T-shirt fostered a conversation with a stranger about domestic violence.

Another student suggested that the analysis might have been too contrived. Several students expressed agreement, taking issue with the assumption that all T-shirts have significance. They offered examples from their experiences that lead them to conclude that T-shirts may do nothing more than express the wearer's taste in fashion.

Jessica pointed out that two arguments had been advanced by the students up to that point. She invited the students to keep these perspectives in mind, but asked them to return to the argument in the article. Several students responded, which made it possible to tease out the notion that the lack of explicit attention to the meaning of an artifact can actually heighten its importance. One student countered that the choice of apparel may not reflect underlying values. Another student pointed out that tastes may be eclectic, and the writer is assigning too much significance to the clothes people wear.

Jessica welcomed each student's contribution to the evolving discussion, but repeatedly pressed students to focus again on understanding the specific claims made in the article. One student pointed out that people might not be accurate in interpreting what clothes mean or the rationales people use in choosing their

clothes. Several students gave examples of ways in which their clothes do not reflect their connections with the words on the shirts.

Jessica pointed out that such stories in fact illustrate the claims the writer is making. She deftly drew the students' attention to the title: "T-Shirts as Wearable Diary." She noted that some of the students had been shifting to issues in advertising rather than thinking about what it means to understand clothing as diary. She invited the students to consider how the author might counter some of their statements about ways in which clothes "don't mean anything." She encouraged them to see a distinction between wearing something to advertise the organization or institution mentioned and wearing something to signal affiliation. She pointed out that the notion of a wearable diary doesn't necessarily point toward a larger cultural meaning, but it does suggest that people's choices of clothes have some kind of meaning, as even the choice of color provides information about a person, and the narratives behind an item's acquisition provide meaningful information about a person's life.

This discussion set the stage for a consideration of how students can apply these insights to the next writing assignment, a rhetorical analysis based on an argument in popular culture. Jessica invited students to consider how their reading of the article might inform their work. The students began discussing their projects, and one student pointed out that the T-shirt article provided a model for developing an analysis that goes beyond superficial commentary and offers a deeper perspective on the cultural significance of artifacts. Another student noted that the article points toward connections between T-shirts and social media. Jessica prodded the students to explore the significance of acknowledging this type of connection. She pointed to ways in which the historical location of the article complicates contemporary assumptions about social media—and helped the students recognize that many of the author's claims about T-shirts continue to be relevant today.

One student suggested that social media platforms have made people more materialistic and self-centered. He suggested that this has changed the ways in which people use T-shirts and other cultural artifacts. The subsequent discussion identified ways in which cultural artifacts continue to evolve and adapt to cultural conditions at particular moments.

Another student pointed out that there are times when people might misinterpret the meanings of particular items. Several students pointed to ways in which misunderstandings have arisen as businesses have made marketing decisions that people have interpreted in ways they didn't intend. Jessica drew the students' attention to the fact that a rhetorical perspective can offer helpful insights about the way in which interpretations have an important role in what an object means. She noted that the broader the audience, the more different interpretations are possible.

Jessica then asked the students to talk about the article in rhetorical terms. Students immediately began naming terms: ethos, pathos, logos, kairos, and rhetorical

triangle. Jessica then pressed them to explain how these terms could enhance their understanding of the article. When the students seemed to be struggling with making this move, Jessica guided their thinking through describing her own efforts to take ethos into account in her choices of clothing. She also noted connections to Kate Ronald's article about literacy as a social practice. She also suggested that the article opens possibilities for considering how clothing can make an argument that people don't intend, concluding with the insight that "rhetoric and literacy are everywhere."

Jessica then invited students to comment on the second assigned article, "Where T-Shirts Meet the Black Protest Tradition." She noted that, although it's possible to argue that the ubiquitousness of T-shirts gets in the way of their meaning, both articles suggest that the commonness of T-shirts allows them to be a uniquely useful vehicle for making arguments. She also pointed out that others argue that activism that takes the form of wearing T-shirts might be less significant than other forms of social action. She went on to present counterarguments that embodying a particular position can implant an idea that does have larger significance. One student immediately expressed agreement through connecting this point to the circulation of the phrase Black Lives Matter. Jessica discussed ways in which clothing can "do work in the world," provided people are critically engaged and aware of this potential.

Jessica then drew students' attention to a final assignment, which requires students to conduct primary research in order to produce a tee shirt diary/journal. She explained that this assignment builds on the earlier assignments: rhetorical cultural analysis, argumentative essay and tee shirt. The tee shirt diary requires students to create a data table that documents data about ten tee shirts: "text, graphics, rhetorical appeals, category, circumstances of acquisition, purpose (to start a conversation, call for action, preserve history, memorialize a person, articulate a struggle)." They will then write a one-page paper analyzing the data. The remainder of the class was devoted to student questions about the assignment.

Jessica demonstrated many strengths in this class session. The atmosphere of the class was positive and productive. Jessica's accessible and engaging personality encouraged students to participate; most of the students present made some contribution to the discussion, and even those who did not speak appeared to be attentive. At the same time, the relaxed atmosphere was accompanied by Jessica's determination to push students toward increasing depth in their critical engagement with the course materials. She persistently guided the students to connect the day's readings with theoretical frameworks that had been introduced previously, and she also encouraged them to consider how the essays and issues they had encountered that day could inform their own writing. I enjoyed observing this class, and it appeared that Jessica's students enjoy being part of it, as well.