**GEL Peer Observation**

Conducted by Laura Hayes

I observed Stephanie Tsank’s General Education Literature course on March 2, 2017 as part of a professional development seminar. With 21 students, the class is an average size for an undergraduate course in the English Department. Stephanie asked me to pay particular attention to clarity and note overall impressions of how the class ran.

**Context**

The class I visited was the first day discussing the play *Trifles*. Stephanie had prepared a “Trifles on Trial” in-class group project that separated students into two groups of the defense, one group the prosecution, and one group the jury. The project required the students to amass evidence from the play in favor of their outcome, and the purpose of the jury was to deliberate as well as summarize the play before the other students presented their arguments.

Before the project began, Stephanie started the class by explaining the agenda for the day as well as giving the students a primer on the following class’s material. She then opened the discussion about the play with reader response questions: “What did you think of this play?” “How is it different from the short story form?” “Anyone read it aloud?” Several students contributed, and with the question, “Did other people have that experience?” Stephanie facilitated an ongoing conversation among students with little comment of her own.

**Classroom Environment**

Stephanie’s classroom environment can best be described as calm and engaged. Her students responded well and their rapport is clear in the verbal and nonverbal communication between students and teacher. When students spoke to Stephanie, she walked or leaned toward them, and likewise there seemed no shortage of students willing to respond to her questions. She’s particularly adept at drawing out shy or distracted students. In a particular instance when a student mumbled through a response, she said with a smile, “Ok—say that again, but with *feeling.*” The result was the class and the student chuckling and the student responding with the desired outcome of speaking louder. Contributing to Stephanie’s rapport with the classroom was her comfort with her material and her students. Stephanie was prepared but did not use notes or have to refer to other information. The class therefore ran smoothly and stayed on track without seeming inflexible. When the students took longer than expected on their group work, Stephanie provided verbal time warnings to each group and posted time warnings on the projector. Despite students packing up and becoming disruptive, Stephanie regained their attention by asking them to wait and in turn respected their time by finishing promptly.

During group work, Stephanie played quiet jazz, underpinning the flexible environment of the classroom. Students worked together, and well, by debating evidence and challenging each other’s ideas for their relevance to the project. At intervals of about 5-10 minutes, Stephanie would join the groups by pulling up a desk and sitting with them to observe their progress. Often, they included her with a question or a comment. At these moments, Stephanie was careful to keep her students on track by prompting them to find the scene in the text, or challenging them to think about the opposing groups rebuttal. Stephanie adeptly led the students to think outside of the patterns the group had created by prompting them with questions and affirming new ideas they presented. Stephanie also provides motivation for her students in the form offering extra credit to the group the jury decides presented the best argument.

**Commentary**

This lesson, depending largely on group work, pushed the class to think about ways the classroom environment works as a community. The trial took place between a class in which Stephanie asks students to read the setting of *Trifles* and teaches the setting of the play as a means of understanding the contents, and a class on *The Glass Menagerie* in which Stephanie teaches the capabilities of drama. In this class, together culling evidence from the play and analyzing and defending the evidence, students mimic the play’s emphasis on community by depending on one another to make an arguable case. In general, Stephanie’s teaching style ranges from lecture to class discussion, to group work and free-writes, which she modeled in the class by beginning with discussion before explaining her expectations for the assignment and opening the class into group work.