March 13, 2014

Re: Observation Report- Allen Strouse

Allen Strouse is a talented and highly skilled English instructor. His ENGL 220 course, which I visited on March 7 from 9:45-11:00 am, was easily the best I have seen in the past nine years I have been teaching at Hunter. This required course is especially challenging because many first-year students are often resistant to and unfamiliar with the analysis of literature. When I visited Allen’s class, I found the exact opposite to be true: I saw a diverse group of students from different majors enthusiastically engaged in literary criticism at a very high level. Moreover, the subject of discussion was Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Crisseyde*, a uniquely difficult text, which the students had read in the original Middle English. I was deeply impressed by the remarkable reading community Allen has created in his class and found him to be an innovative, inspired teacher. He had already overcome any potential inhibitions the students might have had about reading Middle English, and by the time I saw them they were as fluent and strongly conversant as undergraduates midway through a 300-level Chaucer class.

The bulk of the class was devoted to reading aloud from papers the students had recently written on Chaucer. This exercise allowed students to deepen their understanding of the text by hearing the ideas of their peers. Allen asked each student to present his or her essay’s thesis and the evidence used, and to summarize the analytical questions raised. Students listened attentively to one another’s ideas with respect and solicitude and were able to distill one another’s ideas, making new connections between papers. Over the course of an hour, I heard fascinating arguments in miniature about Pandarus as villain; Pandarus as authorial figure; Chaucer’s experiments with narrative voice; images of nature in the work and how they convey concepts of free will, agency, and predestination; and gender inversion and the ideology of courtly love. From the range and depth of students’ approaches to the text, it was clear to me that Allen is that unusually gifted but all too rare instructor who teaches heterogenous approaches to literature that allow students to form their own conclusions. Thus these first-year students came to many fascinating, prescient conclusions about Chaucer as a poet: some saw him as radically democratic in the way he empowers readers to draw their own conclusions; other saw him as a poet of paradox and contradiction. A true credit to the instructor, all of the students seemed to grasp how innovative Chaucer was, and how his works opened up new interpretive spaces within a conservative cultural context.

At every turn Allen made students aware of the pedagogical underpinnings of the exercise they were engaged in, adding greater complexity and rigor to the undertaking. He kept the students engaged, often called upon them directly by name, and re-focused them on the work at hand when they strayed too far from the material. He paired papers together in intelligent ways, showing how they revised each other’s views in some cases, and had the discussion build carefully over time. Throughout the discussion, students made skillful references to poetic devices and literary terms, such as characterization, pun, oxymoron, rime royal, and the concept of “doubleness.” It was clear to me that they had already mastered these concepts early in the term and were eager to apply them to the text.

It is clear that Allen’s students respect and admire him a great deal. He has created a relaxed yet rigorous classroom—the very best example I have seen of the effective teaching of ENGL 220. This is, in short, a very favorable observation.

Very truly yours,

Marlene Hennessy