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Regional

McGee teaches students art of persuasive writing

There has been much discussion lately about the ability of young people to write in a way that is both correct and persuasive. Many educators believe that this ability is both a discipline and an art. Sharon McGee is one of them.

McGee, an associate professor and chair of the department of English language and literature at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, was born in Johnson City, Tenn. She obtained her bachelor's degree in English from the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, her master's in English at East Tennessee State University in Johnson City and her doctorate in rhetoric and composition from Purdue University in Indiana.

As an expert on rhetoric, McGee often times has to confront people's pejorative interpretation of the word itself. She does it with a straight explanation of what rhetoric really is.

"Rhetoric is an area of study since the ancient Greeks about ways in which individuals can become active speakers or writers in the public arena," McGee said. "So rhetoric is about persuasion, but it is about ethical persuasion. It is about speaking and writing. In my case, it is about writing in ways that are productive, ethical, and engage both the mind and the heart of the writer and the audience."

In fact, it is the activist side of rhetoric that drew McGee into becoming an English professor.

"Historically, rhetoric was meant for people to become engaged and active participants in the world around them through speaking and writing, and so for me as a teacher and as a scholar that is very meaningful," she said. "These

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

are ways in which I can help students become better writers so that they can participate as active, informed, engaged citizens in the world."

McGee takes a broad view when the issue comes to how prepared entering students are for college-level English courses.

"I think in most cases our high schools are doing the best job that they can given the restrictions placed on them at the national and the state levels with so much emphasis on standardized testing," she said. "That pressures them in helping students prepare to be good test takers as opposed to really thinking about creative ways to teach language and literature."

McGee said that she is also not particularly worried about the impact of social media on the way people – especially the young – communicate today.

"Social media, texting, will change the nature of writing and writing will change because of social media. English is not a static language and so it changes, it evolves," McGee explained. "Now, academic formal writing has a particular audience and purpose and it is in some ways a very limited audience and purpose. One doesn't necessarily write an essay for a professor when one is in the workplace, but one must be able to employ good grammar and sentence structure and technique to adapt to that new audience and purpose."

For McGee, the most important thing is for people to understand their audience when communicating – whether orally, in



Courtesy of Shan Lu

Dr. McGee while teaching at SIUE.

formal writing or via social media.

One of the courses she teaches at SIUE is scientific writing, which tends to have a very formal, almost rigid, structure. So when she teaches scientific writing

she said. "Again how does one take those findings and convey them in a way that the general population might want to read? Certainly most people don't want to pull an article out of a scientific journal like *Plant Physiology* and read it by their bedside table unless one is interested in plant physiology."

Given the general lack of scientific literacy among the public, one wonders just how information in a journal that is written for specialists can be made understandable to the general public.

"Something more along the lines of *Scientific American* or *American Scientist* writing is one way to do that," she said, pointing to those magazines' efforts to appeal to everyday people. "Or again think about ways, such as Web sites and blogs, or other ways that people convey that kind of information."

She does not see her way of teaching as a cookbook method to learning, but rather a much more analytical and persuasive approach.

"I can't teach a student in scientific writing or technical writing or freshman composition to be able to write any kind of document that they might need, but I can teach them how to think about being a writer, and I can show them how they approach a writing task, looking at models, thinking about them analyzing it," McGee said. "How to think about audience and purpose."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.

for scientists, does she teach it only for the scientific audience or for the general public?

"Well, I try to talk about both the scientific community and the lay public,"