

Excerpt about Teaching in Recommendation Letter
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This is an excerpt from a letter of recommendation I wrote in Spring 2000 on the basis of classroom observations I conducted (see “Observation Notes” included in this appendix).

After a first paragraph in which I describe my relationship to the candidate (how long I have known her; the nature of our work together; etc.) and some of the qualities I have seen across the variety of work we shared, I turn in the second paragraph to a description of her major scholarly projects including her dissertation. This candidate’s publication list and projects-in-progress are impressive and also broad. So as I describe her scholarly projects, I try to identify the larger intellectual questions and approaches that are shared across this range of work.

I focus on the candidate’s teaching in the third (and following) paragraphs (reproduced in full below). The discussion is somewhat lengthy (and maybe that’s problematic). But in conversations with the candidate, it became clear that my letter would likely be the only one that focused on her accomplishments as a teacher. Here are the paragraphs that seek to do that work (and the closing paragraph) in full.

The perspective that Ms. H takes in her research and creative activity is not that of an unbiased "reporter," but that of a "vulnerable observer" (in the words of cultural anthropologist Ruth Behar). In other words, her work is frequently a reflective account of her own hopeful participation in a judicial system that, too frequently, fails to act in the best interests of those who are least powerful and most in need of the court’s authority to intervene.

That quality of her approach to social justice—a sense of her own complicated relationship to it—functions as a tremendous pedagogical resource for her. On two separate occasions and in two different kinds of classrooms (one, an advanced composition course and the other, a composition and literature course for honors students), I’ve watched Ms. H facilitate class discussions of texts that raise questions of social justice and representation. (In the advanced composition course, it was Turgenev’s “The Execution of Tropmann”; in the composition and literature course, it was students’ first efforts to discuss Jane Lazarre’s book, *Beyond the Whiteness of White*). In both classes, students wrestled with challenging texts—texts in which the authors make complicated rhetorical moves mapping out nuanced positions relative to enduring social problems (in the first case, capital punishment; in the second, racial strife). In both classrooms, students were willing to struggle publicly with the textual and ethical challenges that these texts presented. Clearly, Ms. H has established classroom cultures where students felt encouraged to speculate, to set forth provisional explanations and ideas; and, to revise and/or clarify those explanations and ideas with the help of others in

the room. Notably, in both classrooms, student responses to the social and ethical questions raised by their readings of the texts ranged widely across the political spectrum.

In both classes, Ms. H participated in ways that were both honest and also pedagogically important. She maintained the classroom space as an open forum and, when and genuinely pressed by students to offer something of her own position, characterized that position richly and in relationship to the rhetorical strategies evident in the text. So in discussing Turgenev's essay, for example, when pressed by a student to give a position relative to capital punishment, Ms. H responded: "Well, I do think that it's important that Turgenev makes clear to us that this is someone convicted of killing an entire family. He could have chosen, perhaps, a more sympathetic character—someone convicted of some lesser offense. But, he doesn't. I suppose, thinking of this murdered family—particularly if I think of that family as relatives of mine—my very first instinct is to want to see the convicted killer 'pay'; but, that would be a 'first instinct.' And do I want to live in a society that moves by 'first instincts'? For me, that's where this gets complicated." This response, representative of moments in both classrooms, does several things that I value in a writing/literature classroom: (1) It initially returns students to the text and to a specific rhetorical feature of the text; (2) It makes visible for students the particular path by which she could get to the pro-capital punishment position that a member of the class has put "on the floor," and—in so doing—models engagement with another's position; and, (3) This response honestly answers the student's question ("What do you think?") in ways that complicate the more usual binary possibilities (for or against). In all of these ways, Ms. H's response models important connections for students between literature, rhetoric and enduring social concerns.

This extended example is meant to show you something of Ms. H in the classroom—to provide evidence in support of my recommendation of her to you as someone whose research and creative activity (itself spectacular in its importance and in its quality) follows her into her work as a classroom teacher. Because I have been the beneficiary of so much of her work, it is with great enthusiasm that I recommend her to you. I would be happy to provide additional information in support of Ms. H's application. I can be reached at

Sincerely,