



April 11, 2013

Letter in support of Kate Dugan's Teaching

To Whom It May Concern:

I write with some brief comments about Kate Dugan's teaching, which I observed in December 2012 in the context of her discussion section for Prof. Richard Kieckhefer's Religion in Human Experience course. Several features of her classroom presence made the discussion section a successful one. To begin with, the first thing I noticed about the classroom environment in Kate's discussion section was that she was able to talk with students in a casual manner as they entered the room, which set a relaxed tone for the more formal discussion she initiated promptly when class time began. After opening with some announcements, Kate asked students if they had any questions, which also led to further conversation. An innovative technique she used to get the class focused on the day's topic, which was prayer as represented in a number of readings, was that she asked each student to think about what it meant to them and to stand up and write their thought on the board. This was particularly successful because it got students to stand up and actively participate in formulating knowledge about the day's topic.


After this, she transitioned the class from discussing their own views on the topic to analyzing the class readings. She structured this using a group discussion model in which several small student groups prepared the answers to some specific questions about a segment of the reading. Observing Kate's students I noticed that each group spent their group conversation time on task preparing the answers Kate had asked for. After several minutes, Kate brought the class back together and then proceeded around the room to ask students to share their insights. The time reviewing the readings and speaking with their classmates in the small group context helped them to be ready to present some articulate comments to the larger class when it came time for their turn.

Kate managed to foster a classroom environment in which most of the students spoke at least once during class. All students participated in some way, whether it was writing on the blackboard, speaking with their classmates, rereading key passages in the texts they prepared for the day, or sharing their insights with the larger group. Most students participated in all these activities. The fifty-minute discussion period passed quickly, with no student absorbed in Facebook or otherwise disengaged, which is quite a teaching accomplishment!

Kate seemed confident and informed as an instructor. My one suggestion to her after observing her teaching is that she has a tendency to fidget (cross and uncross her legs, etc.) while she is the center of attention in the middle of the class. This is probably a symptom of nervousness, although her composure speaking and directing students effectively in forming an active learning environment would indicate that she has little reason to be nervous.

My overall impression of her teaching in the discussion section I observed was that she was an effective discussion leader, was well prepared for class, and that she experimented with a series of different techniques for fostering student engagement, all positive signs of her development as an instructor.

Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sarah H. Jacoby". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'S'.

Sarah Jacoby
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