Teaching Observation Letter for Kate Nesheim

To Whom It May Concern,

On October 24, 2013, I had the pleasure of observing Kate Nesheim’s teaching of English 205: Business Writing. As I will describe below, Kate is an outstanding teacher who maximizes active student participation by remaining closely attuned to her students’ perspectives and presenting material in ways that her students find personally and rhetorically meaningful and contextually relevant and useful.

Kate’s primary goal for the class I observed was to provide students with rhetoric strategies for analyzing context, purpose, and audience while planning and producing cover letters for the postgraduate job market. In the first half of the class, Kate led class discussions; in the second half, she arranged for students to write a cover letter based on information they were provided about an applicant’s unique background and job goals and then she conducted a whole-class peer review of some of the groups’ letters. This variety of class activities helped keep the class interested and active throughout the ninety minute class.

When the class began, 21 students were seated in a semi-circle around the perimeter of the classroom, facing each other with a clear view of the projector screen at one end of the room. Ten minutes later, another student entered the room and sat down quietly. During the first half of the class, in the center of the classroom, surrounded by her students, Kate led class discussions as she stood by and ran the projector. Much of the material under discussion was presented on the screen, which everyone could see easily. Later during the class, students took out laptops to complete a group task. This classroom layout, combined with Kate’s use of technology through most of the class session, was conducive in encouraging students to remain attentive and engaged throughout all of the day’s activities.

I was impressed by Kate’s success in creating a professional classroom learning environment that her students found highly relevant and interesting. She achieved this goal in a number of ways. First, at the start of introducing each new class segment, Kate clearly explained the
benefit to the students of learning the upcoming material in order to function effectively while searching for employment or while negotiating future business situations in their upcoming careers. She pointed out, for example, how a cover letter is useful in providing the audience (prospective business employers) with more specific detail about key points listed in the resume; she added how a cover letter can also be an opportunity to reveal more about your personality than you can do in the resume alone and, as Kate put it, “present a self that other people will want to work with.” Later in the class, when introducing the class peer review of some of the groups’ rewrites of a cover letter, Kate mentioned how peer reviews have been useful for her, personally (“I’ve learn a lot by looking at other peoples’ materials”) and could be helpful to her students as well.

Kate also encouraged her students to recognize the relevance and importance of the material they were learning. One of her strategies was to ask them to rethink common assumptions of students during the final few years of college and to analyze examples that reflected many of their own life situations at that stage of their lives. For example, Kate mentioned how many young adults assume that the resume alone is sufficient for the job application process and she invested valuable time in pointing out how a cover letter can persuade prospective employers much more than a resume can do on its own. Also, during the group workshop, Kate asked students to collaborate on a cover letter of a hypothetical young adult, “Mickey McGee.” Instead of handing students a set of outstanding credentials of a truly outstanding job applicant, Katie distributed a list of past experiences (some impressive, some not) from Mickey’s past and an unpersuasive resume that failed to highlight Mickey’s most relevant background for the target job and audience. This case was excellent in reflecting the rhetorical challenge of many college juniors and seniors who need to sift through various past accomplishments and experiences to identify those of most interest to prospective employers of particular job openings. As I listened to groups discuss the material before them, I heard many comments expressing how much they related to the case, such as “that’s my problem too — how can I show how my factory jobs relate to a business job?” and “I also have a lot of volunteer jobs in my past and I didn’t get paid for those. Is it ok to include them on the resume and in the letter?” As the students sorted through and discussed these and other “decision points,” I was confident that they were both highly motivated and well positioned to apply new ways of thinking about context and audience in their own upcoming assignment for Kate’s class.

Kate also succeeded in making the entire class enjoyable for her students. Throughout the session, the classroom atmosphere was in turn, serious and cheerful. Kate was careful, for example, to provide, with a clear emphasis on key points, rhetorical/cultural reasons for business writing strategies and actions, but quite often, after making a serious point or observation, Kate or her students would make comments that quickly led to laughter. During part of the class discussion, students leaned forward to listen carefully or to contribute ideas; at other times, they leaned back, relaxed, and enjoyed the comments others were making. Overall, Kate struck an effective balance between assuming an authoritative stance, which helped in earning her students’ full respect of her, and assuming a caring and student-centered
stance that signaled to students that they needed to work hard by taking on the burden of the thinking and learning taking place there.

To encourage (and maximize) active student learning, Kate used different strategies. During the class discussion in the first half of the class, she often called on students by name and asked them to read passages aloud or offer their thoughts about an issue. To encourage extended analysis of points, Kate often asked students “why?” and phrased questions that would elicit more complex thinking (e.g., “Can anyone here make a case for writing a cover letter?”; “What else should this writer address in this situation?”). Also, by setting up a workshop in the second half of the class, Kate motivated students who had been quiet earlier to contribute often and excitedly to the small group discussions. Kate also helped all students feel comfortable and at ease in the peer review session, in which they viewed cover letters that some groups had just finished writing. When displaying each cover letter for the first time on the projector screen, Kate would immediately guide students toward identifying positive writing strategies that one of the groups in the class had used (e.g., “What do you like about this letter?”; “What’s effective about this letter’s organization?”; “What would stand out about this job applicant that an employer would really like?”). After focusing on a letter’s positive features, Kate would guide the class to identify possible revision strategies, but again, she encouraged friendly and constructive criticism should questions like these: “This is a great first draft, but it might be longer than it needs to be. What would you do to make it more concise?” and “Here’s another good draft, but maybe it could be more specific. What would you make more specific and detailed in the letter in order to make it even more persuasive?” These strategies continued the overall tone of mutual respect between students in the class, and between Kate and her students.

Kate is a well-organized and extremely knowledgeable teacher, but even more important, she is highly adept at focusing her students’ learning on the most important rhetorical concepts and ways of thinking that they will need to function well in postgraduate jobs. I am convinced that each of her students will be well prepared at the start of any new job to think in critical, complex ways about the rhetorical situations (the purposes, audiences, and contexts) of each writing task they will encounter. Based on this class observation and my many valuable conversations with Kate about her approaches to teaching, I recommend her enthusiastically and without any hesitation for academic positions that call for outstanding skills in designing and teaching courses with a strong theoretical/rhetorical foundation and a consistent focus on encouraging active student learning.

Sincerely,

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