



University of Colorado at Boulder

Program for Writing and Rhetoric

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9/30/2009

Dear Hiring Committee:

It has been my great pleasure to observe Jesse Stommel as a teacher of first-year writing at the University of Colorado-Boulder, a role in which he has proven a thoughtful student of writing instruction, an excellent responder to student work, and an especially strong classroom teacher. I write, therefore, to recommend Jesse highly for a faculty position at your institution.

I first met Jesse last year when he was enrolled in my ENGL 5559 / WRTG 5050 course entitled "Theory and Practice of College-Level Writing Instruction," a required proseminar for graduate students teaching in the Program for Writing and Rhetoric (PWR) for the first time. During its first eight weeks, this course requires new instructors to learn a number of practical strategies relevant to assigning, responding to, and grading student writing at both "higher-order" (e.g. thesis, organization, use of evidence) and "lower-order" (e.g. grammar and style) levels. During its second eight weeks, the course requires these instructors to reflect upon their practical strategies from a number of key theoretical vantage points within composition studies (e.g. "expressivist," "social constructivist," "process," "cultural studies," and "post-process" approaches).

Jesse had already taught a number of literature, film, and composition courses before enrolling in this proseminar. Nonetheless, he approached the course with great enthusiasm, taking a particular interest in issues related to the teaching of grammar and style. The stance that Jesse eventually adopted toward such teaching is well-illustrated within the following quote from his final course project:

Many instructors draw a hard and fast line...demanding that students must *know* the rules before they can break them. As a student myself, though, I've discovered that academic writing often becomes merely an exercise in proving a knowledge of the rules and conventions (rather than an opportunity to create an intrinsically sound composition), an exercise that continues through each course, with each instructor, in each new writing task. The *when* in which you can begin experimenting with rule-breakage keeps getting put off, again and again, ad nauseam. It's not that I would suggest foregoing attention to grammar and convention from the outset. Instead, I argue that the best way to

approach the teaching of grammar is to teach the rules *and* how to break them simultaneously. It certainly seems sensible to keep these two sorts of teaching moments as close to one another as possible.

To me, Jesse's assertions here demonstrate the thoughtful way in which he came to terms for himself with the fact that students need both to understand the "rules" of grammar, style, and usage and to think carefully about the limits and boundaries of these "rules" within particular rhetorical situations. I agree with him, too, that it does seem "sensible to keep these two sorts of teaching moments as close to one another as possible," even when dealing with students who are novice academic writers.

I also recall with pleasure Jesse's actual work as a teacher of first-year writing in the PWR. His syllabus for the WRTG 1150 course during Fall 2008, for instance, thoughtfully asked students to write about "what it means to be human"—a topic allowing him to invoke his scholarly expertise in the service of writing instruction. He also made sure to integrate technology throughout the course, routinely posting all of his materials on-line through an excellent website and hosting a "writers' blog" to which students contributed extensively throughout the semester. Furthermore, Jesse provided extensive and well-conceived commentary upon student work via e-mail, comments that I described in my notes from the time as demonstrating "an extremely high level of engagement with the issues present within his students' texts." I was especially struck by one student's remark within a 10-page e-mail exchange that she had with Jesse: "I've never had this much (or helpful or individualized) feedback from a teacher, ever."

The formal observation that I did of Jesse's teaching further revealed to me his considerable skill in the classroom. Jesse began the class session that I observed by posting the following quotation from a Susan Sontag reading that he had assigned for that day:

In teaching a new [visual code], photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing.

Jesse then proceeded to lead the entire class through a substantive "close reading" of this quote for about 50 minutes. During this extended discussion, I noted that quite literally every single student in the room made at least one thoughtful contribution to this close reading, whether in relation to the actual quote, the larger reading for the day, or some other idea from the course. I also noted that the overall quality of discussion seemed considerably higher than I typically see in WRTG 1150 courses: students talked freely about the complex relationship between "grammar" and "ethics" within both visual and written texts, about the "worth" of observations, about the "rights" of observers, and so forth.

Undoubtedly, much of the quality of this discussion had to do with the students themselves and their willingness to take the material seriously. Jesse also deserves considerable credit, however, for the expert way in which he loosened and tightened the reins on this discussion. Jesse would occasionally ask provocative questions (e.g. “If a picture is worth 1000 words, then isn’t it more than a grammar?”) while at other times asking questions to clarify or extend student thinking (e.g. “It seems like we’re discussing the idea of ‘enlarging’ something here. Is that right? If so, what do we do with it?”). He always, though, made sure that his questions were asked in the service of successful student learning and engagement.

I left Jesse’s class that day inspired to see whether or not I could conduct my own WRTG 1150 course at the same level that Jesse seemed to be conducting his. And, although I was not able to observe him in other teaching situations, I also left with the distinct sense that Jesse’s skill in promoting close reading and thoughtful discussion undoubtedly serves him well within the other literature and film courses that he routinely teaches.

For all of these reasons, then, I take great pleasure in recommending Jesse Stommel for a faculty position at your institution. Please feel free to contact me via phone or e-mail if I can provide any further information about Jesse or his excellent work as a teacher.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Steve Lamos', with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Steve Lamos
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