

FACULTY TEACHING OBSERVATION AND RECOMMENDATION LETTER

Amrita Bakshi

EN 101

TH 103

Thursday, March 30, 2022

9:30-10:45 am

By Luke Niiler

You had chairs arranged in a circle at the start of class, which began promptly at 9:30, and I counted 14 students present with four more arriving late. You had the day's agenda written on the board: pass the mic (what you learned from research projects), artists' statements, peer review (best paragraphs and not so good paragraphs), and PQP. Students seemed to have a solid grasp on their topics, and had a good sense of what they'd learned from doing their research. I also appreciated the rich variety of topics in play—alcohol laws, athletes and depression, third-wave feminism, social media and anxiety/depression, and human/animal bonding. I appreciated, too, the 'lateral' conversation between students as they shared their reflections. Many of them seemed to be genuinely interested in their classmates' topics and findings.

At 9:51 you switched over to artist's statements on their research papers. You asked your students to reflect on what they did well, what they could have done better, and what their takeaways were. You noted that one of your more ambitious students had already emailed you his statement—and you asked him what his plans for the next 15 minutes were. He said he'd help his classmate work on his statement. I like that you held him accountable. I was also impressed by the fact that so many of your students appeared to be on task. I also appreciated that you took the time to circulate, to move out from behind the lectern/tech island. This, too, was a form of encouraging student accountability. At the 15 minute mark, you asked if students needed more time, and you provided two additional minutes.

At 10:09, you said it's time to switch to peer review. You asked students if they wanted to work with someone sitting next to them or someone new. There was vigorous debate, which you resolved by telling your students to move to new partners and be 'honest but kind,' which you framed as a useful life skill. Students didn't move very far: and said they felt uncomfortable. And you said yes, that's just the point. As the activity began and chatter ensued, you reminded students of the limited time they have on this assignment (15 minutes), and reminded them of the grade value of the assignment.

As your students got down to work, you circulated, coaching, and you reminded students of time remaining—which created a welcome sense of urgency or exigency. You reminded your students to store these peer review materials, in addition to artists' statements and other classroom artifacts, for use at the end of the semester (perhaps in a larger reflection?).

At 10:29, you asked how many students graded their peers' work at 100% (grading was part of the activity). No one raised their hand, and you said OK, that's being honest. You then moved onto PQP, praise-question-polish. You asked your students to write anonymously on index cards one praise, one question, one polish regarding your class. You gave five minutes for this activity. You collected the cards, and as you did, you indicated that you'd review these prior to next class. Next, you asked briefly who used TikTok and Instagram feeds. Lots of hands went up; I presume this was prefatory to the remix unit. You said the next assignment would be focused on presentation of research...and said that they should bring something on social media related to their research. Class dismissed at 10:41. You remained behind to consult with a student.

Your class had a great deal going for it, as you encouraged reflection, monitored your students' progress and held them accountable for their work, and wisely had your students working face to face, sitting in a circle. You set up the remix unit nicely, and demonstrated a palpable confidence and ease. Work on your blocking, as we discussed; let your physical movements be deliberate and intentional. And worry less. You are doing good work. Ease is hard-earned, but you are earning it.

March 8, 2024

Dear colleagues,

I write to recommend Amrita Bakshi for the Carolyn P. Handa Excellence in Teaching Award. I directly supervised Amrita in 2022-2023, when she was enrolled in my section of the teaching practicum, and I have been talking about teaching with her ever since. I can state unequivocally that Amrita's teaching places her among the top 10% of the 300 GTAs I have supervised over the last eight years.

When I observed Amrita teach, I found that in many respects she worked like a veteran. She encouraged reflection, monitored her students' progress, offered individualized coaching when needed, and held her students accountable. In terms of classroom management, Amrita handled transitions deftly, moving between modules with appropriate signposting. It was always abundantly clear to me how her subject matter related to and supported First-Year Writing program outcomes: rhetorical awareness, critical thinking, attention to process, appropriate grammar, and reflection. Her students were all the richer for her compelling and diverse reading list, which included Vivek Tejuja, Pragya Bhagat, Shinzo Abe, and Paula Span. In terms of classroom management—an aspect of teaching many new GTAs struggle with—Amrita maintained a calm, caring classroom environment, calling on students by name, listening closely to their contributions, and providing encouragement and constructive criticism. Every student in her classes felt seen; every student knew that they mattered.

Amrita's students responded in kind, noting on their SOIs that she was “understanding,” “accommodating,” and “accessible.” “She always taught with so much passion and energy,” one noted; another student noted that they were “so grateful for having an amazing teacher who was always there for my classmates and me.” One comment in particular stands out, as it shows Amrita's skill at classroom management: “She is great at creating activities in class that help us have a relaxing class while getting stuff done.” I would concur, having witnessed Amrita's ability to put her students at ease while holding them accountable. This is a difficult task for even experienced faculty, and that she could do so at this early stage in her career bodes well. It's therefore no surprise that Amrita's course and instructor ratings range from 4.6-4.89, well above department, college and university means.

While Amrita's strong teaching record is reason enough to recommend her for this award, there is more. Amrita has a keen sense of professional humility which she regularly demonstrated during the teaching practicum. In that class, she distinguished herself an active student of her own teaching. She wanted to know why. Nothing was too small for her to question: seating arrangements, absent students, and grading. She was quick to raise larger, more existential questions as well: How do I know if I'm being too hard on my students? Too easy? How do I balance kindness and rigor? How do I know that I am developing the skills that I need to do my best work? For Amrita, the classroom is a perpetually rich and re-readable text. The best teachers understand this.

I therefore give Amrita Bakshi my highest recommendation for the Carolyn P. Handa Excellence in Teaching Award.

Sincerely,

Luke Niiler
Director of First-Year Writing
Associate Professor of English