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Re: Observation and Evaluation of Teaching for Sahar Joakim

To whom it may concern:

**OBSERVATIONS:**

I observed Sahar's Intro to Philosophy class on a Wednesday for fifty minutes. I arrived early and noted the pleasant classical music Sahar was playing over the room sound system. Sahar spoke to many of the students individually as they came into the room, congratulating one student on receiving a scholarship and mentioning to another (a senior who got into several law schools) that she might be able to guide one of the younger students (who also wanted to attend law school). Sahar began class promptly at 10am by putting blank quizzes out on a table for students to pick up on their way out. She briefly mentioned the recent quiz and its similarity to the final exam, encouraging students who missed it to pick up a copy of the blank quiz to use for exam prep purposes. She also urged students who had done poorly on that quiz to meet with her to go over things they did not understand. She also handed out a grading rubric for the essay portion of the final exam.

After spending about two minutes on the above course logistics and asking students for any questions on that topic, she shifted to about ten minutes of review and discussion regarding the previous class's topic: Plato's story about the Ring of Gyges. She asked for a volunteer to quickly summarize the story, and after a 5-10 second pause, called on the girl who had just walked in late. The student pretty accurately summarized the story and Sahar added a couple points she had left out, calling on a few other students along the way to add in points. She would ask a pointed question. If the student seemed unable to answer she would sometimes give the student a choice from alternatives (e.g. "is the answer A or B?"). Once the story was fully out there, Sahar called on two students to explain their online posts (reacting to the previous class lecture) about the Gyges story. One student took the story to illustrate the innate badness of human nature. This provoked another student to disagree, claiming that human nature is innately good. A third student supported this point by noting that discrimination/racism is a learned behavior. A fourth student suggested that perhaps human nature is innately neither bad nor good. Sahar then drew the discussion to a close and offered students the opportunity to get extra credit points by continuing to comment online about that topic of discussion.

Sahar then switched to the main topic for the day: Plato's *Phaedo*. Again, by cold-calling on students, she quickly reviewed how this dialogue fits into the story of the Socrates' last days (as recounted in *Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Phaedo*). She had written on the board Socrates' argument for the claim that true philosophy involves practicing how to die. This argument involved the claim that the soul is the part with which one knows. Again, through asking students, she noted connections between this argument and Descartes' body/mind dualism as well as Plato's theory that the soul has three parts. Next, by having students read aloud from the text, she set up Socrates' argument against suicide. In the process, she helped the students with some difficult aspects of the wording of the reading, including noting how the word "one" changed its referent in different parts of the passage. On reading the claim that the body is the soul's prison, she noted the similarity with Kant's claim that friendship frees one from the prison of one's own mind. In doing this she noted that there would be an exam question about this. So her tangents and connections to other material were generally driven by her desire to help students prepare to synthesize ideas on the exam. Based on what was written on the board, there was a bit more of the argument from the passage that she was planning to cover, but the class ran out of time. There was less discussion during this last part of the class, though Sahar several times invited comments or questions.

#### COMMENTS:

Sahar is in control of her classroom, and creates an environment that is challenging (she at one point challenged students to improve their diction by leaving out "umm" and "like" from their comments) for students but nevertheless positive and inviting. I think she has hit a good balance on this score. All the students seemed engaged the whole time, even though most of them had laptops open in front of them. Those I could see were using the computer either to make notes or to read an electronic version of the Plato text. I think the students don't let themselves check out because they know that at any moment Sahar might turn to them and ask them a question. But again, this never felt like an environment of fear or intimidation—only an environment where people need to bring their best to be successful. And in that respect, it is great preparation for a much of work in business meetings.

Sahar knows every student's name and calls their names constantly, sometimes mentioning that student A might want to comment on Student B's post from last time. She is acting as a very effective "glue" to bind the students together into a community of learning. She clearly cares about the students and that goes a long way in keeping the classroom emotionally "warm."

I was a bit concerned about the lack of students talking directly to one another in the later part of the class. However, after the class Sahar sent me a screen shot of some of the online posting that had already begun, and I was very impressed with how the students had not only absorbed the main points covered in the class, but were reflecting on them and raising objections and pushing deeper philosophically. I understand that what I saw earlier in today's class was the followup from an online dialogue that had already been occurring among the students. So the students are always talking to one another about the topics, just not always using a lot of class time for that. I think this methodology (online posts) is a great medium for some of the students who are less verbal/oral in orientation, but I think Sahar could improve her class if she could "time" presentations to

end with maybe five minutes left at the end for students to begin orally processing the lecture information before they leave class. That would give more space for students who thrive in a more auditory mode. I think this “timing” issue is one of course design rather than pedagogy, and I fully expect that as Sahar teaches the same material again in future years, she will have a better sense of just how much can be fit into a class session, so as to arrange for an ending focused more on discussion.

To sum up, I was extremely impressed by Sahar’s teaching. She is only in her second year of graduate school and already she is teaching like an advanced graduate student or early-career assistant professor. She is naturally quite talented as a teacher and brings a great deal of enthusiasm for the task, so her classroom is an excellent place to learn.

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