



**COLLEGE OF
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To Whom It May Concern:

This letter is intended to provide a review of Emma Rifai's teaching while earning her Ph.D. in religious studies and College Teaching Certificate at the University of Iowa. I have had the distinct privilege of observing Emma's teaching in two capacities: as part of her practicum for the Certificate in College Teaching, in which she observed and led class for "Magic Machines: Technology and Social Change" in the fall semester of 2015 and as a grader for "Digital Media and Religion" in the spring semester of 2017. Emma is an exceptional educator. Her thoughtful and nuanced understanding of course material and her encouragement of rigorous engagement motivates students to tackle difficult issues and texts with aplomb. Emma's commitment to provide students with the guidance they need means that students of all levels succeed at advanced assignments in critical thinking and scholarly writing.

Emma's teaching is grounded in her careful attention to the particular challenges students face, and she is committed to teaching them how to tackle those challenges. Using encouraging and supportive techniques, she pushes students past current limitations to grapple with complicated material in sophisticated ways. Thus, Emma extends student capacities while also teaching them how to welcome and manage intellectual challenge. A strong example of this comes from a short lecture and subsequent discussion Emma led on Muslim fashion in Turkey as part of a unit on embodied technologies in "Magic Machines." The students presented a unique challenge: they were profoundly unfamiliar with Islam and Muslim cultures and nearly paralyzed by concerns about saying something offensive or asking a question that might reveal their ignorance. At the same time, much of what they were willing to say or ask reflected their lack of comfort with any sort of religious difference. Emma was able to meet the students there, provide robust and grounding information without reducing cultural complexity, and present focused questions for conversation that engaged students in a productive discussion. Emma modeled fruitful ways to talk about religious and cultural difference without more deeply entrenching their anxieties.

Emma encourages students to think of themselves as intellectual collaborators. She values their input in ways that are readily apparent; students feel respected and heard. She brings genuine interest in productive conversation to the classroom, which builds a classroom culture of open, rigorous discussion. The students in our class took on tremendous challenges because of Emma's particular balance of encouragement and insistence on their thoughtful participation. Emma methodically relates the text under discussion to material previously covered, inviting students to draw on recently acquired knowledge as part of their contributions to any give discussion. This creates strong continuity throughout a course, gives students ample time to work with challenging texts, and demonstrates to them how much they are learning.

Emma has particularly strong talents in her design of classroom time. She is a clear and organized lecturer and uses lecture to round out student understanding of readings and their contexts. These pithy effective lectures serve as strong foundations for the heart of her pedagogy: creative, active, collaborative learning. She brings compelling real-life examples into her lesson plans so that students are aware of the relevance of even the most abstract material. Using a successful mix of structured discussion and creative activities that spur critical thinking, Emma creates classrooms that inspire a great deal of student involvement. From charts students must collaboratively fill in on the chalkboard to thoughtful conversation about challenging topics, students work with each other to reach into new learning in ways that are inviting and enjoyable. The true mark of Emma's success as a teacher is something I witnessed again and again: her teaching prompts students to create new ideas together with increasing independence. They become critical readers and thinkers who seek out challenge and collaboration.

In sum, Emma is a capable and talented educator who brings compassion and challenge to her students in ways that make them learn and love to learn. She fosters a spirit of collaboration and risk-taking that encourages deep engagement.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jenna Supp-Montgomerie". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "M".

Jenna Supp-Montgomerie
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