

Brandon James O'Neil  
University of Iowa, Dept. of English  
12 February 2018

To Whom It May Concern:

Since joining the PhD program in August, knowing Ryan Furlong has been a joy to me. His masterful teaching and gentle demeanor make him a strong candidate for your "Outstanding Teaching Assistant Award."

A few weeks ago, I had the privilege of observing Ryan's undergraduate course on the "Interpretation of Literature." Arriving shortly before the beginning of class, I noted that Ryan was already there, making sure the computer was set for an informative PowerPoint presentation he would use later in the lesson. There were twenty students registered for the course, and as they came in, Ryan greeted every one. As class time began, he then engaged in comfortable conversation with them as he briefly took attendance, taking the time to acknowledge and see each student.

Beginning the lesson with the basic rhetorical structure of a written argument, moving to poetry, and concluding with analysis of a story by Conan Doyle, Ryan's teaching load was not light on the day I observed him, but the material was covered with the grace of a master teacher. To one watching Ryan in the classroom, his love of teaching is evident. He maintains open dialogue with his students, often asking questions of them and encouraging questions in return. Community in the classroom is encouraged through group work and collaboration, allowing students to hold each other accountable, with minimal enforcement necessary. I observed an engaged classroom with an alert instructor.

Ryan divided his Interpretation of Literature syllabus into sections related to notions of "enchantment," exemplifying his imaginative approach to literary studies. Reading a poem to his students was a full-bodied experience, and elicited imaginative responses from students who were asked their impressions of the poem. At first receiving largely surface-readings, Ryan gently directed them toward deeper consideration of the piece, and I was pleased to see evidence of student engagement with the text on more complex theoretical levels.

If to be an "Outstanding Teaching Assistant" is to inform students' imaginative practice and inspire them to seek fresh perspectives through literature, then I can think of no candidate more deserving than my friend and colleague Ryan Furlong.

Sincerely,  
Brandon James O'Neil