Dear members of the selection committee,

ALIDA LIBERMAN’s passion for teaching is infectious. I hadn’t heard of the American Association of Philosophy Teachers before I met her, but within ten minutes of hearing her talk about its biennial conference, I decided to attend. And that’s how I found myself in a classroom awkwardly attempting to fold a paper crane, all the while being blown away by Alida’s pedagogical superpowers.

Let me take a step back. The origami exercise was part of one of two sessions lead by Alida at the AAPT conference taking place in North Carolina A&T State University in July 2018. These sessions are typically interactive, and this is particularly true in Alida’s sessions, where attendees fully engage in active learning and collaborative teaching.

I’m going to talk about these sessions in some detail, because they exemplify many of Alida’s pedagogical talents. From my triple perspective as a fellow teacher, an actual student of pedagogy, and a pretend student of philosophy, I was able to see the intricate layers hiding under the seemingly simple lesson plan. In both sessions, Alida—an accomplished amateur dramatic actor and comedian—used her performing skills to create a plausible but flawed learning experience, so as to show us (the fellow teachers pretending to be students) what happens when you teach badly. In one case, the flaw lay in not providing adequate instructions for the origami assignment; in the other, in not properly leading a class discussion. Both experiences were illuminating at several levels. Alida was able to elicit not only a cognitive understanding of the many ways in which teachers can fail to scaffold and facilitate student learning, but also an emotional grasp of what it means for students to be taught by such teachers.

In the first session, titled “Lessons from an Unsupported Learning Activity and How to Better Support Student Success”, different groups of “students” received increasingly sparse and less effective instructions about how to fold an origami crane: the range went from Alida personally showing how to fold the paper and giving individualized feedback to… nothing at all! No images, no explanation, just the demand to make a paper crane. I was relatively lucky to end up in a group that had bare instructions but also a member who had previous origami knowledge, so we were able to produce cranes, albeit mediocre ones. But I still vividly remember the sense of shame, resentment, and indignation I felt when I heard Alida proclaim (with some glee) that our collective grade was B-! Even though I knew it was
all pretense, Alida had created such a plausible scenario that I found myself experiencing
disappointment and anger at not being able to perform as required, through no fault of my
own. And shame was also triggered by the thought: “how many times have I put my
students in this position?”

As for the second session, titled “Cultivating Classroom Conversation in a Culture of
Quiet”, Alida aimed to analyze reasons why students might not participate in classroom
discussion. Alida chose as discussion topic something about which she presumed most
attendees knew very little or nothing: RuPaul’s Drag Race, a TV show featuring drag queens
competing. Her expectation turned out to be right. Most of us had absolutely no clue what
she was talking about, perfectly mimicking the experience of a student lost in a complex
philosophical discussion. Even though Alida had provided attendees with an initial framing
and explanation of the session’s goals, once she started the simulation I felt overwhelmed by
the barrage of questions with which she was purposively inundating us. As a non-native
speaker, I was also struggling with her intentionally fast speaking pace. Alida was thus able
to, once again, create an immersive experience in which competent teachers (as many AAPT
conference participants are) could put themselves in their students’ shoes and draw
stimulating lessons from it.

I could talk for a long time about the complexity of those sessions, but I would run
out of space. Fortunately for the reader of this letter, Alida has published an excellent article
(with Jennifer Wilson Mulnix) on the origami exercise. In the article, Alida and her coauthor
clearly lay out the rationales and intended outcomes of the exercise, but also the unexpected
lessons that stemmed from unpredictable factors, such as the fact that Alida could not
remember a step in the folding process for the group that was supposed to get full support
from her. Alida’s sophisticated analysis of that moment alone (pp. 445-446) is worth the read
for the self-reflection ability she demonstrates.

Self-reflection is a skill that Alida also constantly cultivates in her students. As I was
reading through her teaching materials, I was struck by a wealth of positive features (more
on those in a moment), but none more than the emphasis on meta-cognition. Alida gives her
students many options to reflect on their learning, and to try and understand what they are
doing in that process, whether it is successful, and how to improve it where it is not. But this
emphasis on meta-cognition is only of the many elements exhibiting Alida’s vast knowledge
of contemporary empirically-based pedagogy. As I was reading her exercises and syllabi, I
kept taking notes of techniques I should adopt, explanations I should downright copy (with
her permission, of course!), and details I should get better at clarifying.
Her syllabi are, of course, impeccable. Alida leaves nothing to guesswork: her students know exactly the expectations they will be held to and the standards that she will use to assess their work; where they can find resources and how they should use them; how to read philosophical texts and how to write philosophical papers (which are often not the traditional type of philosophy paper, but much more creative implementations, such as living a day as a utilitarian or a Kantian, and reflecting on the experience); when assignments are due and how they should be submitted; and much more. It is hard to be so comprehensive without submerging students with too much information or overcomplicating things, but Alida manages to do so. Her masterful formatting (i.e., font choice, colors, bulleting) highlights priorities and helps to quickly individuate each element of the prompts. In order to help students visualize the grade weights she uses a colorful pie chart! There is no hidden curriculum or even simply implicit norms: students who have never used Canvas, or who have never taken notes, or who do not know how grades are weighed—all of them are met where they are, with grace and compassion, but also without sacrificing any rigor and without being permissive or lax. Alida knows how to hold firm, clearly-stated boundaries, combining high expectations with a student-centered approach, which puts students in the conditions to succeed and meet those expectations.

What I admired the most among the many documents she shared with me, however, are the open-ended reading reflections that Alida assigns students as homework before each class session. At the risk of waxing poetic, let me say that they are a thing of pedagogical beauty! They provide an answer to all possible practical questions about submission modality, grading and the like, but more importantly they contain detailed indications about process, content, and form of the reading reflection. Let me just give a few examples for each of this element. With regard to process, she doesn’t just encourage students to take notes, but provides multiple examples of how students can take notes. With regard to form, she notes explicitly that she wants certain things divided into paragraphs, or asks for certain answers to be clearly marked. (This might seem trivial, but as teachers we are very affected by how students format things, yet we often fail to disclose our preferences. Having everybody format things in the same way also helps with assessing content without being distracted by appearances.)

As to content, I need to explain a bit more. The reflections are graded for completion, and each student is required to engage with the text in three ways of their choosing; the aim is to help students see that they can engage productively even with texts that are difficult or that they do not yet understand. Alida includes 13 distinct “modes of engagement” with the readings, divided into 6 groups, which are “Comprehension”, “Queries”, “Connections”, “Criticism”, “Epiphanies” (my favorite, which includes describing how you changed your mind or how a reading made you feel), and “Other”,
which is where she provides an extensive and specific list of fun and creative ways of engaging with the text (for instance, “Paraphrase a key idea in another writing style (e.g., as a tweet, as a poem or song lyric, etc.),” “Create a meme related to the reading” or “Create a short video reaction to the text (e.g., on TikTok”). For each reflection, there is a metacognitive moment as well, since students are asked to think about how long doing this assignment took, so that they will develop better time management skills, and Alida will gain a sense of whether she is assigning too much reading.

Once again, I could go on and on about Alida’s teaching materials and techniques. The—very reasonable—word limit on this letter is starting to stress me out because there is so much more that deserves at least a quick mention. For instance, she always strives to have readings lists that are diverse in terms of perspective, social identity, tradition, and medium (i.e., she uses not just scholarly articles or books, but also popular press, podcasts, videos etc.). The topics of her courses are always stimulating; alongside traditional and timeless topics, one can find many that are urgent and timely (Case study: should we reform, defund, or abolish the police?) and close to students’ lived experience (Real world ethics: ethical issues in dating).

In sum, the picture that emerges from her syllabi, prompts, and guides are a constant effort and eagerness to help each student succeed and develop their potential, and an exceptional capacity to make that happen. I wish I wasn’t strongly opposed to using student evaluations for summative purposes, because otherwise I could now refer to Alida’s glowing evals. Alas.

While I have not had the fortune to see Alida teach her own students, I have seen her in action when I invited her as a guest into one of my classes, to answer questions about one of her papers, which I had assigned as a reading. Her real teaching persona shares the humor and energy of her AAPT “bad teacher” persona, but none of the aggressiveness and ineptness: she is calm, encouraging, crystal-clear, and able to gently tease out the best of a student’s question.

Alida’s success as a teacher is not surprising given her longstanding commitment to excellent teaching. She was the recipient of a teaching award in graduate school at USC, where she also organized and presented workshops for its Center for Excellence in Teaching. After starting her career as assistant professor, she has continued her pedagogical education, receiving specialized training from the AAPT, and then serving as facilitator and organizer of several workshops for the Association, including as lead facilitator for the AAPT’s first workshop in inclusive pedagogy. Most recently, she has written a fantastic paper, forthcoming in *AAPT Studies in Pedagogy*, titled “In Defense of Doing Philosophy
Badly, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Imperfection,” which exemplifies her original and innovative approach to teaching and philosophizing (the two being inextricable).

Preparing to write this letter has given me unprecedented access to Alida’s effective, inclusive, transparent, multi-layered, truly *exemplary* pedagogy—I learned so much from it and cannot wait to implement several of her strategies in my own teaching. I have no doubt countless students’ philosophical learning and college experience have been positively impacted by it. I hope you’ll give Alida the recognition she so richly deserves.

Sincerely,

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