August 5, 2023

Dear Prize for Excellence Selection Committee,

I am writing to nominate Dr. Rebecca Scott for the APA/AAPT/TPA prize for Excellence in Teaching Philosophy. As I will show, she is exemplary in the classroom and as a pedagogical thinker, a collaborator and as a mentor for others. She is also an award-winning researcher whose work is focused on philosophy pedagogy.

I think the most fundamental insight of Dr. Scott’s teaching is this: that each student brings a unique set of skills; hopes, curiosities, expectations, and fears; and possibilities to a classroom and that her job is to somehow take all of that into account to create the richest, most nurturing and respectful, collaborative and vibrant classroom community possible. Disappointment is an ever-present feature of philosophy and philosophy classes and moving from disappointment to curiosity and enjoyment is necessary to keep students engaged; it is also necessary for them to do their best thinking. Thus, teaching philosophy at its best requires exceptional attention to student experience, where their fears are likely to stymie them, and how their skills and curiosities can be leveraged to allow each of them to succeed. It requires detailed focus on classroom spaces and how being physically at ease can allow for deeper and more critical thinking. And it requires demystifying even the most seemingly natural habits of mind philosophers have honed (and thus are likely to struggle to recognize) that are strange for students. As a faculty, it requires creating a campus where growth and shared reflection has become a habit for public discussion. And as a discipline, it requires organizing opportunities for thinking past traditional practices and exciting the imaginations of philosophers that have been trimmed through a culture that myopically ignores pedagogical knowledge, as if disciplinary knowledge is sufficient for excellent and inclusive teaching. Dr. Scott does all of that, and more.

I have had the pleasure of working with Dr. Scott as a lead teacher for which she was a t.a., a co-teacher, a chair while she was part of the department I lead, a co-author, and co-facilitator of many workshops in teaching and learning. Even as her oft supervisor, I have learned greatly through conversations with her, watching her teach and facilitate, and through her public work. In this letter, I will start with her as a classroom teacher to highlight what makes her uniquely effective (and innovative) and then speak to her larger impact on the philosophy community through her writing and facilitating. I will also be including
quotations from students, colleagues, her current chair and others to show the impact she has had on them.

**Classroom Teaching**

She is an amazing professor who takes the time to truly get to know her students. I hope to one day be a Philosophy professor like her. I hope she wins this award!!!

Jacqueline Perez

Dr. Rebecca Scott is an incredible teacher. One of the things that really make her stand out is her commitment to making the course work personally meaningful to her students. She has tirelessly worked on her critical thinking course, reinventing it so that it speaks to students today who need to navigate social media discussions that can spiral out of control, detect fake information, find out about the voting system and candidates before they vote for the very first time, and answer other everyday questions that arise in their lives. It is inspiring to see Dr. Scott’s dedication to crafting a critical thinking course that can help students work through real-life disagreements where interlocutors might be disingenuous or power relations might have an important role. I have spoken with students who have taken this course with her, and it is clear that she successfully gave them an opportunity to develop reasoning in a manner that is personally meaningful to them.

Stephanie Adair (departmental colleague)

Dr. Scott is an exemplar for me in the constancy of her reflection on her teaching and the innovation of her practice in light of what she is reading and thinking about. I remember when she began carefully considering the physical space of classrooms in pedagogical ways. Shortly thereafter she had been awarded a small grant to physically alter a classroom in ways that were more consistent with literature around the impact of lighting, seating, and other environmental conditions on student learning.

Giancarlo Tarantino (collaborator)

These colleagues note the attention Dr. Scott gives to aspects of teaching, and of the student experience, that are easy to take for granted or think are beyond our control. Her careful thought shows how, for her, every nook and cranny of a class is to be examined, reinvented, to maximize student engagement and learning. In what follows, though I could focus on many, I will focus on four innovations of Dr. Scott’s in the classroom which speak to her attention to (1) students’ vulnerability, (2) their shared learning, (3) their individuality, and (4) their (and her) imagination.
One of the most remarkable elements of Dr. Scott’s teaching is her way of giving feedback to students. What makes Dr. Scott’s approach so powerful is how she recognizes student self-understanding and situatedness. Before giving feedback, she asks students to fill out a form that will guide the tone of her feedback. On it, they decide if they want more gentle, neutral, or more critical feedback, and why. The question itself leads to deep metacognitive reflection and learning on their part. In so doing, she also enacts appropriate (though exceptionally rare) humility on her part: she doesn’t know what kind of day, week, semester students are having and thus defers to them to make the best choice for the tone of the feedback. This doesn’t lead to hiding the truth from them, rather, it allows them to calibrate her comments appropriately. Interestingly, this leads to more learning on their part. If they trust her to attend to them, they are more likely to be able to listen to the feedback offered. Feedback, which can feel confrontational and can fracture trust, thereby becomes a way of building relationships with her students. It takes much more time to do this and a great emotional intelligence, too. Faculty often complain that students do not seem to be paying attention to the feedback they have worked hard to offer; Dr. Scott’s students do not fear the feedback and thus are more able to attend to it carefully.

Second, she has been innovating to uncover for her students what moves lead to progress in classroom discussion. All too often, we ask students to discuss without articulating why we ask them to do so and without teaching, explicitly and overtly, the skills needed in philosophic discussion. Naming specific moves that students can utilize, she uncovers what goes on in discussions that make real progress. These are the skills Dr. Scott teaches her students, has them practice, and gives them opportunities to reflect upon. Again, this leads to great metacognitive awareness for why they are doing what they are, how to do it well, and how it is supporting their learning.

Third, she allows students to showcase their own skills and curiosities by allowing them a wide range of ways to show that they have met the learning goals for the class. If the goal is, for example, understanding some portion of Symposium, they might write a paper; but they might write a song, create and explain original artwork, or build a contraption. For her, allowing students to leverage their own interests and skills in the classroom builds their confidence, excitement, and leads to more time-on-task; it also leads to better learning the material (as is widely shown in the literature on multi-modal learning, as articulated here). Students come to appreciate other students and their talents. And it is serious fun.

Finally, I want to highlight the way Dr. Scott is on the cutting edge of game-use within philosophy classrooms, using, for example, Dungeons and Dragons to teach ethics. Gaming is a way to engage with students where, as she says in her Game for Thought conversation (viewed more than 3400 times), that by turning activities into games, being wrong, on student’s part, becomes the norm; any game in which one always wins or gets things right is simply not much fun. Games thus reverse the normal pressures in classrooms, making errors part of normal activity, not something to be avoided and feared.
Her impact on the Profession

Rebecca takes teaching deeply seriously but is also takes philosophy classrooms to be places where fun and games help students create meaning together. She is committed to teaching other philosophy teachers to enact this playful seriousness (or maybe more appropriately, this serious playfulness).

Claire Lockard (colleague)

She has taken time to meet with graduate students of mine interested in developing innovative education outreach and pedagogy related to philosophy and dungeons and dragons. They said Rebecca gave them not only incredibly useful tips and tricks for doing philosophy in this way, but also bigger picture strategies that can help carry themselves (and their undergrad students) even further. The grads felt really inspired by the work they see Rebecca doing with her own students, and I think her inspiration is clear in the work I have seen them develop for their own students now.

Melissa Jacquart (co-author)

Her impact beyond her classes is primarily in widening the imagination of philosophers, giving us permission to dream, to embrace our own nerdy selves, and concrete examples of how to do that that we can follow. The serious playfulness of her classes is also the tone and impact she has on others; why not bring D and D, or your drums, or your circus skills to class?

Dr. Scott is a beloved and masterful facilitator for the American Association of Philosophy Teachers, including co-leading multiple AAPT/APA Graduate Student Seminars and AAPT workshops, AAPT Teaching Hubs, and more. She hosted a workshop at Harper College on inclusive pedagogies and she was a co-author of an article that won the 2020 Mark Lennesen Prize for the best article in philosophy pedagogy for the prior two years, also on inclusive pedagogy. She has also been a regular board member for the AAPT, for the APA Committee on Two-Year Colleges, and for Teaching Philosophy. She also works hard on her campus at Harper to encourage reflective, careful pedagogies and the values of teaching as a shared enterprise, creating communities of practice.

She... has been instrumental in helping lead her colleagues in keeping professional development at the forefront of the department agenda with brown bags, speakers, and discussion groups. She's even helped lead a pilot project within the department aimed at closing student success gaps based on race that has produced some dramatically successful outcomes.

Jaime Riewerts
Dean, Liberal Arts, Harper College
She... led her department in implementing and assessing best practices and spaces for collaboration, facilitated a community of practice on gamifying learning, and been active in helping to explore ways to improve our online course review rubric and has been vocal about making sure hyflex learning modalities do not cause students to be more disengaged.

Stephanie Whalan  
Chair, The Academy for Teaching Excellence  
Harper College

In sum, Dr. Scott is an exemplar of exceptionally student, student-learning and community-fostering teaching. She is wildly innovative, uncovering what philosophy learning looks like, teaching philosophy skills, alleviating fear and feelings of alienation in the classroom. And she shares her spirit, insight and imagination on campus and in the discipline, thereby bringing out in others this same desire to make of philosophy something that allows us and our students to make meaning, to take the work seriously. Serious fun, that is.

Sincerely,

Stephen Bloch-Schulman  
Professor and Chair of Philosophy  
Elon University  
Elon, NC