



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

October 22, 2009

Deans' Teaching Award Committee  
AddRan College  
TCU  
CAMPUS

Dear Teaching Award Committee:

I am writing in support of Curt Rode's nomination for the Deans' Teaching Award. As Director of Composition from 2000-06 and Director of the New Media Writing Studio from 2006-present, I have had many opportunities to work closely with Curt in both his role as an instructor for the English Department and as a consultant for the Studio. Curt is a committed, thoughtful, and generous teacher and colleague whose work has benefitted not only his many students (as an instructor, he taught 8 courses a year; his work in the Studio comes with a 6-course-a-year load) but everyone he comes in contact with. His nomination is more than deserved.

One of my earliest exchanges with Curt came shortly after he began teaching at TCU. As a new instructor, Curt was committed to teaching the curriculum that I had created for ENGL 10803 and ENGL 20803, but he was concerned about how to do so while teaching a large number of students. Writing courses at TCU typically involve multiple drafts and extensive teacher response—the only proven method for learning how to improve one's writing—and I was impressed that rather than simply abandon the common curriculum (and as an experienced teacher, he was free to do so), Curt wanted to make it work. Ultimately, Curt decided to focus his attention on the writing that students could and would revise rather than the many short reading responses that were also part of the curriculum, and I fully supported this adjustment. I tell this story because it demonstrates Curt's respect for program standards, his earnest desire to see his students' improve, and his ability to weigh costs and benefits of any pedagogical decision, always with the students' best interests in mind.

From that moment, Curt has gone on to become a stellar teacher of both writing and literature courses. He has demonstrated an impressive range of teaching—from required first and second year composition courses, to creative writing courses from beginning to graduate-level, and finally to American literature and poetry. Most recently, he has been rethinking all of his courses in order to allow students to engage in new media composing in addition to producing traditional texts. As Curt has told me, bringing new media composing into his courses has kept his teaching

“fresh.” Given the amount of time instructors must spend meeting students and responding to their work, they can be forgiven for wanting to keep course content the same, but Curt is the kind of teacher who wants and needs to be constantly expanding his repertoire, to challenge himself and his students, even if success comes more easily when doing something familiar. As an overly cautious teacher myself, I have been inspired by Curt to try new things, even when it requires extra time and means risking failure. The results (such as the production of an online class magazine in one of my classes) have thrilled both my students and me, and I have Curt to thank for that.

Since I have had the pleasure of observing Curt’s teaching, let me mention briefly here that he has a thoughtful but engaging presence in the classroom, and I can see why students flock to his classes. In the fall of 2007, I visited Curt’s Introduction to Poetry class (ENGL 10113), a class of 40 students that meets the core requirement for literary traditions and thus enrolls many who are there just because it is a requirement. On the day I visited, the class was scheduled to discuss some difficult material, poems by Claude McKay and Jean Toomer that dealt directly with lynching. Curt was honest with students that the subject matter was unpleasant, but he skillfully connected history, visual representation, literary theory, and the poems themselves, which resulted in a fully integrated lesson on the larger theme of poetry as a means of glancing into “the stranger’s heart.” Pushing past students’ reluctance to discuss the subject, Curt invited them to offer their interpretations of lines and images in the poems, gently encouraging them and leading them to more complex understandings of an already distant and complex experience.

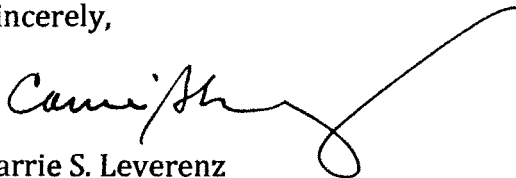
I was similarly impressed when Curt met his Intro to Poetry students in the New Media Studio to introduce them to his “pod poem” assignment in which they had to represent their interpretation of a poem as a video. Here is an example of Curt pushing himself to do something he thinks is valuable for students. After having done this assignment with small classes, he wanted to try it with two large sections, dividing them up and teaching half the class at a time so they could all do hands-on work in the New Media Writing Studio (which holds only 20) with his guidance. During the introductory class which I observed, Curt explained and gave a rationale for the assignment, showed examples of past student work, and offered a brief introduction to Photoshop and Moviemaker, two software programs students would need to use to produce their videos. When these students later came to the Studio to work on their projects during my lab hours, I was impressed with their determination to get all the details—the colors, the fonts, the visual effects—right. Their attitude was testament to Curt’s ability to set a challenge that engages students, that gives them new things to learn, and that makes them feel that what they have learned is valuable. That he did this in a freshman-level core course for non-majors was especially impressive.

I know that Curt has discussed his role in the New Media Writing Studio in his Teaching Statement, but as the director, I want to note how essential his work has been to the program’s success. When I wrote the VIA proposal in 2005, my aim was

simply to provide more support for new media writing and teaching across campus. I felt that students who were not fortunate enough to be in technology-rich departments deserved the chance to learn to use newly available composing tools to produce texts for digital environments. Not being an expert in new media writing, I elicited the help of several colleagues who were willing to invest their time and energy in learning how to teach this new kind of writing and to help other teachers do so. Curt signed on early, has been committed to the program through all four years of our existence, and has signaled his strong interest in continuing to do this work even though our grant runs out this year and we have not yet secured permanent funding. The New Media Writing Studio represents an extraordinary experiment in non-hierarchical collaboration and an emergence theory of learning—the idea that we build our knowledge base through our collective efforts rather than through individual expertise. Curt is a valuable and valued member of the team who consults with teachers throughout campus on creating new media assignments, offers workshops to faculty, instructors, and students, and provides individual support to those who drop in to the Studio during open lab hours. While I am often frazzled by the sheer number and variety of tasks we have to perform in a day while working in the Studio, Curt is always a calm and steady hand of support. I wish I had kept track of the number of times I've sent an email to the Studio staff in the midst of trying to solve a student's problem, only to receive within minutes an email or phone call from Curt offering to help. This is the kind of teaching—of students and colleagues and colleagues' students—that can't be easily documented but that can make a difference in our ability to learn and to teach and to be happy with the outcome of our efforts.

In closing, let me say that while I know instructors are sometimes treated as (or even seen as) “less than” tenure-track faculty, instructors like Curt are in every way equal in training, expertise, and professionalism. His accomplishments as a writer, as an advisor of the student literary society, as a teacher, and as a colleague are only that more impressive knowing that he has given TCU so much without the concomitant rewards of tenure and promotion (though I am glad that is changing). I don't know if instructors have been eligible for this award in the past, or whether they have ever won it, but there is no question in my mind that Curt deserves it. I am grateful for all I have learned from him.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Carrie S. Leverenz", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Carrie S. Leverenz

Associate Professor of English, Director of the New Media Writing Studio