



April 10, 2012

U.S. Professors of the Year Selection Committee  
CASE  
1307 New York Avenue, NW, Suite 1000  
Washington, DC 20005-4701

Dear Selection Committee:

Large classes, especially ultra-large classes, are a substandard educational experience – students are anonymous, the professor is a tiny spec at the front of the class, and the motivation to engage in the kinds of social and cognitive processing necessary to foster deep learning is less present in class than a Burmese pro-democracy leader. Unless, of course, the teacher is one of those rare individuals who can reach across 51 rows of seats, grab you by the grey matter, tickle your amygdala, and open up a new world right in front of your eyes like a Ridley Scott movie – John Boyer, Geography instructor at Virginia Tech, is one such individual.

Having read John’s materials for the CASE Professor of the Year award, you are already aware of his innovative use of technology, sense of humor and good will, Plaid Avenger persona, and motivational abilities. As an educational psychologist and Director of Virginia Tech’s *Center for Instructional Development and Educational Research (CIDER)*, I want to provide you with a look under the pedagogical hood. I have been working with John for the last 2+ years to provide guidance and direction in making sure that as John’s mind races forward into the next millennium, his courses are well grounded in the research and wisdom of scholarly teaching.

In 2010, John opened his course to me and we engaged in long conversations regarding his vision and goals for the course. We then set out to align his course goals, objectives, activities, media, and assessments, establishing an instructional design foundation that was solid and reliable. This design work was then assessed through a large scale evaluation of his class, revealing that 97% of the 1534 students who completed the evaluation survey *agreed* (somewhat agreed + agreed + strongly agreed) that “this course has increased my ability to examine world regions and events critically and from multiple perspectives”, and 96% of the students *agreed* that “the instructor’s approach has increased my appreciation and understanding of members of cultures other than my own.”

Professor Boyer is one of the best university instructors in America.  
— Student, 2012

The Bouncing Cats event and this class as a whole have inspired and encouraged students like me to get off our asses and realize that in this age of Globalization we have the ability now more than ever to get up and do something.  
— Student, 2011

Just wanted to let you know that we were watching Jeopardy and I nailed the Final Jeopardy question because of you.  
— Student, 2009

You have taught me to pursue the world with curiosity.  
— Student, 2008

My son, Patrick, took your class freshman year and turned us into plaidfans.  
— Parent, 2011

John's ultimate goal for the course has always been for students to be active participants in their own educations and for students to ultimately become self-regulated life-long learners. As a social constructivist, John emphasizes a social or activity source of knowledge, bringing to the forefront language, culture, and context. His pedagogy is in agreement with that expressed by Bakhtin (1984), that meaning "is not to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively search for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (p. 110). It is this dialogicality that motivates John to adopt an activity and assessment approach based on the sharing of international movies (International Movie Night), adoption of world leader personas (Twitter World Leader Shadowing), contributions to ongoing political dialogues (The Economist blog posting), and attending campus or regional international-focused events (International Event Papers).

In addition, John's class builds on the essential principles of learning, connecting new knowledge to prior knowledge; creating and revising schemas to describe the world and experience; thinking critically about work events, from defining precursor events to predicting the future; and developing expertise through learning and applying knowledge principles flexibly – fundamental principles of world geography that apply in Haiti, also apply in South Africa, Mexico, Japan, and Ireland. Finally, John motivates his class by challenging them to think about their work, giving them control over their success and failures, providing them with choices in exploring the world, connecting students to their peers and the outside world, fueling their curiosity of the unknown and their desire to learn, and caring about his students success and the world in which they live.

Finally, John leverages technology – Skype, Twitter, blogs, turntable, Ustream – in pedagogically appropriate ways. In a day and age when teachers are asked to apply technology for technology sake, John wields technology for pedagogy sake, connecting students to peers for dialog, bringing experts to his class remotely (e.g., Skyping in Aung San Suu Kyi from Burma), fostering the asking of questions via Twitter from the 51<sup>st</sup> row, and entering the minds of world leaders via Twitter.

In summary, John's teaching is instructionally sound, grounded in a social constructivist philosophy represented though cognitive psychology theory, and enacted in motivationally appropriate activities.

Sincerely,



Peter E. Doolittle  
Director, CIDER

Your course changed the direction of my life. Since then, I've been lucky enough to work for an NGO in South Africa, the Global Fund in Geneva, the UNDP in Sierra Leone, and to have travel to other interesting places. I'm graduating from Harvard Law this Spring where I've focused on International Law and human rights.

— Student, 2003

Shortly after 9/11, perhaps it was that Thursday or Friday, I walked into your class ready to learn whatever was on the syllabus. Instead, you asked the class if we'd like to discuss the attacks. The way you related the history of terrorism and wars in the Middle East to geography was truly awesome and actually served me well as I worked in intelligence at the Pentagon during the height of the Iraq and AF wars.

— Student, 2003

I just wanted to thank you for making such a positive impression and for inspiring my son. He SKYPED me tonight for the first time since leaving home for VT.

— Parent, 2011