

Mike Bertal

This semester, Mike is teaching an introductory engineering design course at his university- a large, public institution in the United States. Mike enjoys involving his students in lively experiential activities such as discussions of real-world applications and ethical and environmental issues. In recognition of his high satisfaction ratings from students, Mike recently won a university-wide award for excellence in teaching.

One student in his class, who has recently come to the United States for undergraduate studies, seems particularly reserved, perhaps even uncomfortable. The student does not participate in group discussions. His projects, although they are proficient, accurate and detailed, do not offer evidence of original thinking or creativity. Mike is concerned about the problem, but has not yet talked with the student.

Jeremy Geraci

Jeremy Geraci had been excited about teaching an introductory biology class for non-majors. He knew that many students graduated from high school without understanding basic biological principles.

The course had run smoothly, although there had been some unusual questions during the section on evolution. One young man had approached Jeremy after class and asked him whether he thought that carbon dating was a reliable process. Jeremy had explained that the inaccuracies in C-14 dating were only moderately significant in comparison to the large time scales the dates encompassed. The student had seemed unconvinced, but left without explaining his position fully.

At the end of the semester, most of Jeremy's evaluations were complimentary. But halfway through the stack was the worst comment Jeremy had ever received:

“You'll burn in hell for this. Stop teaching evolution or else.”

Gina Gilbertson

As she taught her discussion section of Engineering Dynamics, Gina Gilbertson wrote out an expression for momentum on the blackboard. In her classroom sat twenty-five college students in various stages of alertness.

In the third row sat a group of five students from China.

After she was done writing out her equations, Gina turned to the class and asked for an example of an everyday life situation where momentum was important.

Jay, a Chinese student, said something that Gina could not understand. The other four Chinese students, who all sat with him, laughed.

There was an awkward pause. “Could you repeat that?” Gina said. “I didn’t hear you.”

Susan, another Chinese student, spoke up. “He is just making a joke,” she said.

As the discussion continued, Jay leaned back in his chair and went to sleep. Gina thought about calling on him again. She decided not to do so.

Sam Gold

Sam Gold taught a rowdy Thursday night section of a chemistry course at a large public university. Sam's political views were more liberal than those of most of his peers- and his students.

One night, as Sam began describing the role of a catalyst in a reaction, he heard one student say, "We could blow the Arabs away with that shit, huh?"

Many other students laughed at the joke. "Yeah, we'd turn Iraq into a dust bowl," said another young man who had a brother in the Army.

"Show those ragheads what we're there for," a third person chimed in.

Sam was upset by these comments. However, he knew that the professor he worked for generally adopted a "boys will be boys" attitude towards students' shenanigans. How could he handle the situation in a way that would encourage his students to be professional, without alienating them?

Martin Hernandez

Martin Hernandez, Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Industrial Engineering, stood up to greet Angela Johnson when she entered his office. Angela was dropping out of graduate school.

“Have a seat,” Martin gestured to a chair across from his desk. “So, let’s talk about why you’re leaving the program. Frankly, I’m surprised to see you go.”

“Well,” said Angela, with some hesitation. “To begin with, my advisor, Larry Hofstedt, told me that I would have to take lower-level courses because my college education at a historically black institution was not up to par. I also had a series of very discouraging in-class experiences. I was even accused of cheating when I got an “A” on an exam.”

John Lithcovich

“I just can’t take this any more,” John said to his wife, Mary, over their dinner.

“You’ve got to stick with it,” Mary said. “You’ve always wanted to go to nursing school.”

“I know, honey,” said John. “But I can never find time to meet with the other students in my group. And after my shift, I’m too tired to do the homework.”

John paused. “I don’t want to come across like I’m blaming people... But everything would be all right, if my professor understood that we don’t all have time for this group work.”

Mary set Susan down in a high chair and gave her some baby food. “Isn’t there an office for returning students at your college?” she said.

“I don’t know,” said John. “These 12-hour days - they don’t design paramedic jobs around schooling, and they certainly don’t design college for working people.”

Marie Louise Moreau

Marie Louise Moreau wondered whether she was the only student in her chemistry group who had read the assignment before coming to class. She had expected more when she had taken a plane from Haiti to study at a prestigious college in the United States.

She spoke up. “Well, when I was doing the reading,” she said, “there was a note in the sidebar that said you should add titrant slowly near the endpoint. That way, when the solution changes color, it is easier to tell how much titrant was added.”

Joe, her group’s self-appointed leader, looked at her with doubt. Could she be right? He didn’t want to rely on Marie’s word alone. “Adam!” he called to their TA.

Joe repeated Marie’s statement to Adam. “Is that true?” he said.

“Good memory, Joe,” said Adam, clapping Joe on the shoulder. “That’s right. You’re an asset to your group.”

Jennifer O'Connor

Assistant Professor Jennifer O'Connor showed her class a slide of a male seahorse with a pouch. She juxtaposed this with a photo of a female kangaroo. Today's topic was animal reproduction.

"Does anyone know of a species – other than humans – that forms life-long same-sex partnerships?" O'Connor asked. "Several species of ducks, for example..." The class seemed surprised, but listened attentively, taking notes.

O'Connor was surprised when, several weeks later, she found an anonymous letter under her door. The letter decried her attempts to "poison young minds." "We, as parents, should not have to pay this high tuition to have someone shove the homosexual agenda in our faces," the letter concluded. A copy had been sent to her dean.

O'Connor was concerned that this matter could affect her upcoming third year review – a crucial step in the tenure process.

Allen Powell

Department Chair Allen Powell opened the door to greet Bimal Silva, a new faculty member in Electrical Engineering.

“So, how was your first semester of teaching?” Powell asked.

Silva shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. “Well, to be honest,” he said, “I am a little disappointed in the quality of student participation.”

“How so?”

“I often noticed that students would roll their eyes in class,” Silva replied. “The questions were clear. I was also surprised to find that my students were often unfamiliar with basic concepts.”

Powell looked out the window briefly, and then back at Silva. “I can understand your desire to give your students a quality education. But you need to work with them at the level where they currently are.”

Dan Reilly

Dan Reilly entered his chemistry discussion section with his ASL interpreter, Jane. Dan was a bright student, but was frustrated by his lack of communication with the other students.

Today, the TA announced that the first group to solve the challenge problem would have five points of extra credit. The group around Dan turned to each other and began trying to solve the problem, ignoring Dan. Jane, who didn't know the signs for acetylene or poly(acetylene), began spelling out the names of the polymers.

In frustration, Dan walked back to his desk and opened his own textbook. He took out a pen and paper. He looked closely at the textbook description of addition polymerization and worked through the problem. The solution became obvious.

As Dan and Jane walked back to the group, there was a commotion at the front of the room. Another group had won.

Barbara Ross

Barbara was a prolific researcher in Astronomy at a large public university. However, she knew that her teaching skills needed improvement.

After attending a diversity presentation, Barbara resolved to try and mentor her students of color more. She was particularly concerned about Jim, an African-American student whose grades were poor.

Barbara invited Jim to her office hours without telling him her concerns. When Jim stopped in, she asked him about his career plans. He responded that he wanted to be a scientist.

Attempting to be tactful, Barbara told him that he would need to improve his grades to get financial support in graduate school. However, Jim did not think that his grades were a problem. After all, he told her, he did not want to be an astronomy major.

Barbara recommended that Jim switch to a lower-level course to maintain his GPA. Jim told her that he could manage on his own. They parted on less than cordial terms.

Frank Taylor

Frank Taylor was a tenured Biology professor. His classroom interactions were highly professional.

One day, two students, Audrey Blanton and Jenny O'Neill, stopped by Taylor's office. After some conversation, Audrey began talking about a problem she was having with an assignment in Professor George Castor's class. She asked Taylor to help her with the problem. When he suggested that she talk with Professor Castor, Audrey said that when she had recently done this, Castor had asked her for a date.

Before Taylor could respond, Jenny spoke up. She, too, had been 'propositioned' by Professor Castor.

Castor produced stellar research. However, he had a track record of sexual harassment from the days before his tenure. Taylor was not particularly close to him.

Although Taylor felt he had a professional duty to respond, he understood the power structure at Metropolitan. His department chair was not favorably disposed towards female students- or towards him. What could he do?

Angela Tsu

Angela, a first-semester sophomore, had tried to do well in introductory physics. But, when Angela sat down in front of her first exam, she spent half of the test staring at the paper and trying to breathe slowly.

With her first “F” in hand, Angela went to the physics tutoring center. Her tutor, Jim, suggested that they approach her professor.

Angela was allowed to take as much time as she needed on the next exam.

“Excellent job,” Angela’s professor said to her. “You won’t need extra time on the next exam. You earned a 100%.”

The final exam began with a complicated question about a space shuttle that left Angela completely confused. She rushed through the rest of the questions. *If I fail, I fail*, she thought.

Sharon Whitby

Sharon Whitby was a graduate student TA in Computer Science.

This semester, there was a young man in her class named Jeff Eberhagen who seemed overqualified for the course. Not only was his coding correct, but he sometimes added extra features to the programs. Sharon was impressed.

Sharon gave an assignment for students to design a computerized dating program which would match people up based on their interests.

A week later, Sharon looked at Jeff's results closely. There seemed to be too many variables. She found a puzzling equation. "If gender1 does not equal gender2, then genderpref=0. If gender1 equals gender2, then...."

Sharon put down the paper. The assignment was incorrectly done. Sharon disapproved of homosexuality in principle, but she knew that she shouldn't let her beliefs influence her decision. Had she let Jeff get away with too much on the first assignment? She couldn't bend the rules.

Melanie Wong

Professor Melanie Wong, chairperson of the Mathematics Department, looked around her at her colleagues as they sat in a department meeting. “Recently,” Melanie began, choosing her words with care, “I received a letter from an organization that provides support for women in science and math. Women who major in mathematics as undergraduates tend not to persist into higher levels of education. They are asking us to include female mathematicians in our course material. I would like to hear from you as to what you think about this, and what you could do in your courses to make this happen.”

“This is all very well,” Ross Kosovitch said, “But mathematics is a neutral science. Of course, women have contributed to mathematics, but to single them out seems biased.”

Another senior mathematician nodded in agreement. “I believe that we should all make an effort towards mentoring female students,” he said. “But to skew the curriculum is a disturbing proposition.” Many of the other professors nodded in agreement.