
Case #14: Sharon Whitby

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"Ah, students," Sharon Whitby thought as she sat with a pile of assignments to grade in front of her on her desk. Why did college students have to be so difficult?

It was the middle of a busy semester in Sharon's Ph.D. program. Sharon was studying Computer Science after four years of service in the Air Force. She was bright, determined and disciplined. Outside of school, she volunteered for charities sponsored by her church. She planned to marry, settle down, and get a job in her field after she was done with her degree, although she was concerned about having enough time to raise a family.

Sharon did not resent working as a teaching assistant. In fact, she enjoyed interacting with her students and had good rapport with the class. Her students knew that she believed in treating people fairly.

This semester, there was a young man in her class named Jeff Eberhagen who had a mischievous sense of humor and asked many questions. Sharon quickly surmised that he was overqualified for the course when she graded his first assignment. Not only was his coding correct, but he had added extra features to the program. She gave him an "A" and wrote "Great Job" on his paper.

Jim Cruickshank, the professor for Sharon's course, believed in giving students assignments that related to everyday life. The second assignment, which amused the teaching assistants a great deal, was to design a computerized dating program which would match people up based on their interests. During her discussion section, Sharon described the parameters of the program.

A week later, when she began to leaf through the stack of assignments, Sharon looked at Jeff's results closely. There seemed to be too many variables. Had he misunderstood the assignment? She scanned down the printout and 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. When Sharon referred to "dating", she had meant heterosexual dating. But what if her best student was... well... trying to tell her something? 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? Above all, she wanted to be fair. Sharon resolved to talk with Jeff after class. She was sure that he would redo the assignment perfectly once she explained it. She couldn't bend the rules just because Jeff was an "A" student.

Before you turn the page and read the sample analysis for this case, you may want to complete the following worksheet.

1. What issues does this case study raise?

2. What questions for group discussion come to mind as you read the case?

3. What could the instructor do in this situation? Generate several possible responses.

4. What might be the consequences of each of these responses?

An Example Case Analysis

Some Issues Raised By the Case:

This case focuses on the moral beliefs of the teaching assistant and the extent to which they impact her assessment of a student's work. Her strong beliefs concerning sexuality and ambiguities in the parameters she set for the assignment conspire to confuse Sharon's judgment of fairness and her assessment of what constitutes an assignment "incorrectly done." Her response is incongruous, given her previous appreciation of "creative" answers to programming assignments.

Possible Discussion Questions:

- Was the assignment answered correctly, within the parameters provided?
- How does one recognize when one's own beliefs are unduly affecting assessment?
- Is it appropriate for Sharon to assume anything about Jeff, based on his answer?
- How open should instructors be to students' unusual or surprising answers?
- Should Sharon require Jeff to "correct" his answer?
- If Sharon refuses to give Jeff full credit, even though his program works, what should Jeff do?

A Possible Set of Responses and Their Consequences:

1. Response: Sharon could talk with the supervising professor about the appropriateness of the answer.

Consequences: Sharon may risk exposing her biases. This may also "out" the student to the professor.

2. Response: Sharon could ask another TA to grade the assignment.

Consequences: Asking another TA to grade the assignment places a burden on the other TA. This may also have the effect of making the student visible as gay, regardless of his actual orientation.

3. Response: Sharon could acknowledge that she made a mistake in not stating that the dating assignment was heterosexually oriented. Because she did not state that the assignment was for opposite sex couples, she could accept Jeff's work and give him full credit – as long as the program works.

Consequences: A challenge of presenting "real-world" examples is that our world is wonderfully complex. The goal of these examples is to engage students in the subject matter. The aim of the assignment – writing code and getting it to run – was successfully accomplished. Accepting Jeff's work should not pose a problem.

4. Response: Sharon could realize that she has overlooked part of the population in her assignment criteria. This could prompt her to pay more attention to inclusive assignment design in the future, regardless of her perspective on sexual orientation.

Consequences: It is likely that other assignments given in this class may not be inclusive. While Sharon may or may not choose to discuss her realization with the professor, she can alter her own syllabi and assignments in the future, thereby welcoming students of all backgrounds.

Resources

Sellers, S.L., Roberts, J., Giovanetto, L., & Friedrich, K. (2005). *Reaching all students: A resource for teaching in science, technology, engineering & mathematics*. Madison, WI: Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning. (See sections on bias-free grading.)

Connolly, M. (2000). Issues for lesbian, gay and bisexual students in traditional college classrooms. In V. A. Wall, & N. J. Evans (Eds.), *Toward acceptance: Sexual orientation issues on campus*. Washington, DC: American College Personnel Association.

Jenkins, M. L., Gappa, J. M., & Pearce, J. (1983). *Removing bias: Guidelines for student-faculty communication*. Annandale, Virginia: Speech Communication Association.