
Case #8: Jennifer O'Connor

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Assistant Professor Jennifer O'Connor stood confidently in front of her class of sixty-five students at a Midwestern community college. She was well prepared to discuss what she thought would be an interesting topic related to current events.

Jennifer often exposed her students to facts and ideas that were new to them. This strategy engaged her students in the course content. Today's section on the sexual reproduction of plants and animals was filled with facts that students often found surprising. For example, a lively discussion usually ensued when Jennifer mentioned species, such as spiders, that had unusual gender roles.

Standing in front of the chalkboard, Jennifer greeted her students. "Today," she said, "we will be discussing the reproductive patterns of many different species. As we focus on the diversity of these behaviors, consider how these adaptations may be useful within the ecosystem each species inhabits. Let's begin with the seahorse." Jennifer cued up her slide projector and showed an image of a male seahorse with a pouch on his belly. Her next slide juxtaposed the seahorse with a female kangaroo. Jennifer discussed the reproductive behavior of each species.

Jennifer turned back to the class before moving to the next slide. "Does anyone know of a species – other than humans – where some individuals form life-long same-sex partnerships?"

There were some looks of disbelief on the faces of Jennifer's students. No one spoke up, but Jennifer could sense that her students were paying attention. Even the people in the back row had looked up. Jennifer thought that this would be a good teaching moment. She clicked the projector to the next image – a picture of a male duck. "Several species of ducks, for example..."

Jennifer went on to describe the mate selection and longevity of these same-sex partnerships in the animal kingdom. "These partnerships are an example of the occurrence of homosexuality in nature," she explained. The class listened attentively, taking notes, and no one voiced any concern – at the time.

Jennifer was surprised when, several weeks later, she found a letter tucked under her door. It was an anonymous letter from a parent of one of the students in her biology course. 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. Jennifer was further dismayed to read that a copy had been sent to her dean.

Jennifer was not sure what to do. She was concerned that this letter could affect her upcoming third year review – a crucial step in her tenure process.

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:

In this case study, the professor was insensitive to a controversial issue. Her naiveté led to reactions that she did not expect. This case raises the issue of academic freedom. Is Jennifer O'Connor's responsibility to teach biology, or to challenge student assumptions about topics that may be politically sensitive? Or, on the other hand, does she have a responsibility to communicate about both biology and current issues?

Possible Discussion Questions:

- If a male professor had addressed the same issue, would the students have reacted in the same way?
- Does the fact that the letter is anonymous make it less worthy of consideration?
- Was this a reaction on the part of a student or a parent? Should parents influence the education of college students?
- Was Jennifer O'Connor attempting to surprise her students? If so, was this appropriate?
- Is a science class an appropriate place to discuss social issues?
- Should the professor frame divisive issues in a way that allows for disagreement or a "balanced" discussion, even if she has strong beliefs about the topics?
- How might a gay student in Jennifer O'Connor's course have felt?
- How could Jennifer O'Connor reduce politicization and increase intellectuality in her course?
- How could Jennifer O'Connor encourage open discussion of controversial issues? Should she?

A Possible Set of Responses and Their Consequences:

1. Response: Next time the course is offered, have an open discussion with the class about the issue. Before the discussion, prepare the class for discussing controversial issues by setting ground rules and encouraging participation.

Consequences: This may add a social science element to the course. On the positive side, it may expose Jennifer O'Connor's students to a new way of talking about difficult issues, which may be beneficial for them in the future. However, it does depart from strict adherence to science content.

2. Response: Do nothing. Address the issue only if the dean raises it.

Consequences: If Jennifer O'Connor believes that receiving one letter is not sufficient to make the issue worthy of consideration, she may choose this tactic. However, if she ignores the issue, it may be raised later at a time she would not prefer, such as at her tenure review.

3. Response: Discuss the letter with the dean and seek advice.

Consequences: Depending on the climate of the institution, the dean is likely to be supportive about the issue, and would probably appreciate Jennifer O'Connor's request for advice

4. Response: Bring the topic up in a faculty meeting.

Consequences: Other faculty may have experiences they can share which would be helpful to her. On the other hand, they may disapprove of her teaching methods.

5. Response: Apologize to the class.

Consequences: This action would admit that the issue was political, and would bring an interdisciplinary element into the class. Also, if Jennifer O'Connor does not believe she has done anything wrong, this

would be a sign of low confidence as an instructor. Bringing up the issue again may enrage the students or their parents further.

6. Response: Omit that section of the course next time it is taught.

Consequences: This may deprive students of an opportunity to learn an important science fact which is socially relevant. In effect, the professor would be censoring herself.

Resources

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.

Oldham, J., & Kasser, T.. (1999). Attitude change in response to information that male homosexuality has a biological basis. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 25, 121.

Schellenberg, E., Hirt, J. & Sears, A. (1999). Attitudes Toward Homosexuals Among Students at a Canadian University. *Sex Roles*, 40(1/2), 139.