

A Case of Bias in Teaching, Grading, and Plagiarism

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A Case of Bias in Teaching, Grading, and Plagiarism

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CASE OVERVIEW

The target audience for this case study includes Ph.D. in Business students, who are taking classes related to instructional methods in business, or anyone who is teaching or preparing to teach a college course. It is particularly beneficial to readers who possess prior knowledge of various teaching methods, classroom incivilities, classroom management, and assessment and grading styles, as well as issues pertaining to plagiarism. In order to facilitate an active learning environment, an instructor must refrain from exhibiting the following behaviors: disrespect for students, bias in teaching, inconsistent grading styles, and unjust allegations of plagiarism.

Keywords

Teaching; Grading; Class Management; Plagiarism; Respect for Students

CASE SUMMARY

Dr. Puta was a professor who had a problem with a student whom he felt was not qualified to be enrolled in his class. This worried Dr. Puta so much that he tried to remind the student to “pull his own weight” or risk receiving a grade that would reflect Dr. Puta’s beliefs about him. Paul was a student who was determined to pass the class and did everything possible to do so, but it seemed that the professor felt whatever Paul did was not good enough. Eventually, Dr. Puta accused Paul of plagiarism and decided to set up a panel against him. What can be done to prevent professor-student conflict in class and to address the issues of disrespect for students, bias in teaching, terrible grading style, and student plagiarism effectively?

CASE

In Dr. Puta’s internet security class, there were no textbooks. Instead, he required his students to utilize journals and research papers in order to complete their research on internet security. Dr. Puta distributed some of these materials in class. Others were available on the internet, especially on Wikipedia. Each week, he usually instructed his students to research keywords, define them, and present examples where applicable in their report.

The Professor

Dr. Puta was a young professor who just got tenured after teaching information systems courses for seven years at a midsize university in Maryland. When he received his first chance to teach at the Ph.D. level, his department wanted him to teach the internet security class, which was one of the seminar classes for the Ph.D. program in Information Systems. He has several publications, he is married and has two children, and he prefers to have his students lead class discussions.

The Student

A particular student was performing very well in his weekly reports, but Dr. Puta was worried about the student’s level of understanding because he was the lowest ranking student in a class of four. Paul was an African American student from Nevada who left his wife and three children to work on his Ph.D. in Maryland. He usually returns to Nevada one weekend per month and in the summer to be with his family. Paul earned his MBA in Information Systems in 2000. He had taught information systems courses at the college level for six years, and he had also been a high school math teacher for two years. He hopes to complete his Ph.D. by 2014 as a full-time student and to become a professor like his father.

Class Management

Dr. Puta always reminded Paul, in front of the class, about his concerns for Paul's understanding of the material because he was a first year Ph.D. student, unlike the others, who were in their third year or ending their second year. Dr. Puta would state, in the presence of all, that if Paul was unable to discuss the course content sufficiently, he may get a low letter grade in the course.

Dr. Puta would state frequently, "Paul, you are not as experienced as the rest of the students who are more advanced than you, so I am very worried about how you will perform in the class. Moreover, this is a higher level course you should have taken later, so I am concerned about your understanding of the material. If I feel that your understanding of the material is low or is not improving, you may end up with a "C" or "D" grade in the class. I am really concerned."

The student would always respond in class that he had taught information systems courses in Nevada for six years, but despite the fact that internet security was new to him as a specialized subject, he appeared to be doing better than or as good as the other students.

Paul usually responded in class, stating, "Sir, despite the fact that I am the only first year student, I seem to be contributing to the class discussion more than the other students, except for Joe. The weekly reports are very helpful, Wikipedia is a lifesaver, and each week I get a broader scope of internet security issues."

After class, the other three students in the class would sympathize with Paul, because they did not see any reason for Dr. Puta's views of Paul. Despite the student's disagreement with Dr. Puta's treatment of Paul, no student agreed to speak up or act as a witness if Paul reported the incident to the department chair. They were more interested in getting a good grade in the class than joining Paul on Dr. Puta's list of bad students. Paul went on to inform the department chair about the incident.

In Paul's meeting with the department chair, he states, "I am tired of Dr. Puta undermining me in front of the whole class. I began the program with a high level of respect from all my peers, now the students in the class are beginning to treat me lesser than I deserve because of Dr. Puta. During class, I now feel neglected and alone because it is not in the best interest of my classmates to side with my opinions in class like they did initially as well as in other classes we took together. Moreover, I am afraid to ask questions for clarification because Dr. Puta will use it to justify his distorted view of me, yet others seem to have more questions than I do."

The Issue of Plagiarism

On the weekend of the Americas Conferences on Information Systems (AMCIS) paper submission deadline, which Paul was preparing for and whose paper was eventually accepted, Dr. Puta emailed Paul to inquire about whether Paul understood what plagiarism was. Paul replied that he did. He then asked Paul to define it by email, which Paul did. During the next class, Dr. Puta returned Paul's weekly assignment ungraded and explained to Paul after class that he had committed plagiarism. Paul was extremely devastated by this incident, which happened just before midterm.

Solving the Problem

Dr. Puta reported the incident to the Ph.D. Coordinator of the School of Business as well as the Ph.D. Coordinator for Information Systems. The former felt Dr. Puta should have first discussed with Paul about his plagiarism from Wikipedia because Paul did cite Wikipedia in his work, even though he should have typed some sentences that appeared to be exact quotes in quotation marks. The latter prepared to set up a panel to investigate the incident since school policy dictated that was the proper procedure to follow. Paul was also asked by Dr. Puta to resubmit all previously graded assignments to be reevaluated for the possibility of plagiarism.

When Paul found out what was going on, he complained to the Ph.D. Coordinator for Information Systems about Dr. Puta targeting him because of his race and academic status. Paul also complained that Dr. Puta socially undermined him in front of the class frequently. In addition, Paul claimed that a student from Ghana who was ending his second year and was in Paul's class had gone to report to the Department Chair and the Dean of Business the following problems about Dr. Puta's class: Dr. Puta's unethical grading based on racial favoritism, Dr. Puta's lack of knowledge about course content, and his own need to change his field of study from information systems to accounting.

According to Paul, "There are only four students in Dr. Puta's class, two Black males, a Black female, and a White male. No other student contributes more than Joe and I, yet we have the lowest grades in the mid-term. Joe got a 'C' for mid-term and

I got a ‘D,’ while the White student got an ‘A.’ This is not possible because the weekly report and presentation grades do not even add up. Dr. Puta may get away with the fact that I am a new student, but how can he explain the fact that Joe, who had worked as an Information Technology manager for 20 years in Ghana, got a 4.0 GPA in his MBA in the same department two years earlier, as well as does research and teach other professors’ course when they are out of town, is not doing well in his class compared to the other students.”

How do we resolve and even prevent issues in teaching that deal with some instructors’ disrespect for students, bias in teaching, inconsistent grading style, and unjust allegations of plagiarism?

EPILOGUE

Ultimately, no panel was set up, and no plagiarism was found in any of Paul’s previous work. Paul had to resubmit the plagiarized assignment for half credit at the end of the semester, but Dr. Puta gave him full credit because he performed very well compared to the other students, overall. Eventually, Joe and Paul each received a “B” in the class, but Joe switched to the Ph.D. in the Accounting program.

CONCLUSIONS

All students in a class should be given a fair chance to prove themselves and not be subjected to the teacher’s biases from previous experiences. As long as a student is a registered member of a class and regardless of his race, gender, or academic status, a student’s assessment should be based on his performance in comparison to his classmates—not what the professor expects his performance to be. Just because former students in certain categories may have performed poorly, the professor must not assume that current students in similar categories will do the same.

When a professor gives a student negative feedback in front of other students, it is a form of class incivility and social undermining. Even if the professor wanted to meet privately with the student, his concerns for the student’s success should be based on the student’s work or contribution compared to other students and nothing else. If other students in the class perceive that a professor is negatively evaluating a particular student without cause, it may not only lead to the rest of the class ostracizing that student, but it will affect the active learning environment for that student.

The purpose of evaluation, assessment, and feedback is to enhance learning for the student rather than to just give grades. Dr. Puta used the focus on grades to negatively affect Paul’s active learning environment instead of actively listening to what Paul was learning from the class. In the case of plagiarism, it should have been an opportunity for Dr. Puta, as Paul’s mentor, to assist Paul in learning how to avoid plagiarism in the future. Yet, he was more interested in using e-mail to set a trap for Paul that he could use as documented evidence to reduce Paul’s grades or to even prompt the panel to dismiss Paul from the program for plagiarism.

ENDNOTES

- 1) Algozzine, Beattie, Bray, Flowers, Gretes, Howley, Mohanty, & Spooner (2004) states that the primary purpose of evaluation is to improve learning and employment decisions, not grades.
- 2) According to Barnes, Christensen, and Hansen (1994), there are some benefits to teachers having a partnership with their students in class and that the quality of context plays a role in creating an adequate learning community.
- 3) Most new teachers rely on past experiences rather than focusing on their current students to address difficulties. Some are guilty of dealing with diverse students without empathy, are rude to students, and are physically abusive to students who press them for assistance (Boice, 1996).
- 4) Hurtado (1996) states that students who feel that their academic environment was student-focused tend to have better educational experiences across race and ethnicity, as well as increased engaged process of learning.
- 5) Mentors should provide students with both psychosocial (empathy, counseling, and role model) and instrumental (coaching and networking opportunities) support for their students (McGregor, 2006).
- 6) Teachers should display fairness in grading, have power over the lives of their students, and communicate their values when they teach (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2011)

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TEACHING NOTES

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Case Overview:

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Teaching Objectives

This case should be used in a course that prepares students or anyone for teaching college classes. The objective of this case is to make students aware of the role of professors in enhancing active and engaged learning through adequate class facilitation, professor-student partnership, evaluation and assessment, and mentoring. The aim of the case is to demonstrate how students should be treated regardless of their race and academic status, the importance of fair grading, respect for students, and how to deal with plagiarism.

Methodology

The professor and students in the case were interviewed, and this is a summary of what they stated. I found this case to be very interesting because it shows that some professors bring past experiences into their current classes, which should never occur. Just because some members of a particular group or students who had a lower academic status may have performed badly in the past, does not mean it will be the case in the new class. A professor must keep an open mind and be fair to all students in order to enhance active learning.

Suggested Teaching Approach

This is a case that should be used towards the end of the semester in a class used to educate students or anyone who wants to teach a college course. The class should have at most 30 students. It should be used for a 50-minute class period, and the case should be given to the students the class before it is discussed. The students of the class should be divided into two debate teams. One side will present what the professor should have done differently, while the other side will present what the students should have done differently. The students should be informed about their debate teams ahead of time in order to facilitate better preparation for the class discussion.

The instructor should give the “professor team” the first five minutes of the class discussion to present its case; the second five minutes will be for the “student team” to do the same, and then, each side will have 10 minutes to evaluate each other’s opinions on the issue through open discussion and questions. The next 20 minutes will be used for individual students to discuss the questions below as the professor writes the main points on the white board for the class to see. The instructor can call on students or allow the discussion to flow freely. The last 10 minutes should be used by the professor to summarize the main points the class has created on the white board and to include his or her own view to enhance what the class has analyzed.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Explain the issues in the case.
- 2) Discuss how Dr. Puta should have handled Paul’s plagiarism.
- 3) Why would Dr. Puta be worried about Paul if the others students disagree with his views of Paul?
- 4) Evaluate how Dr. Puta’s behavior could have disrupted active learning in his class.
- 5) What should the students have done to diffuse the tension in the class?

Suggested Answers

1) The issues in the case are as follows. Dr. Puta unjustly feels that Paul may not perform as well as the other students because of his lower academic status, despite the fact that his weekly reports are great and the fact that the other students do not seem to understand why Dr. Puta is worried about Paul's performance. It appears that Paul makes useful contributions in class discussion, which is usually appreciated by other students, but the other students are no longer engaging with him in learning because of how Dr. Puta is facilitating the class. There is also an issue of plagiarism from Wikipedia, which Dr. Puta wanted to set up a panel for against Paul instead of using it as a mentoring opportunity to show Paul how to avoid plagiarism. Another student, Joe, also feels that Dr. Puta shows favoritism in his grading style. Two students, who happen to represent 50% of Dr. Puta's class, are having issues with their grades despite the fact that they may be contributing more than anyone in the class.

2) Dr. Puta should have discussed the incident face-to-face with Paul to see if the plagiarism was intentional, and used it as an opportunity to show him how to avoid plagiarism in the future. If it was intentional, he may have reduced his points for the first offense and still showed him how to avoid it. It was unethical for Dr. Puta to attempt to set up a panel without first discussing the plagiarism with Paul. It appeared that Dr. Puta was more interested in failing Paul than making sure that he was actively learning in the class. Constantly reminding Paul that he could receive a lower grade was not just a form of negative feedback used to undermine Paul in front of the class, but was also an attempt by Dr. Puta to emphasize grades above active learning. Grades are meaningless without learning.

3) Answer may vary. Dr. Puta may not have liked Paul's discussion answers or felt his answers were not as good as Paul's classmates, but the other students in the class seem to have disagreed with his analysis of Paul's contribution in the class. It could not have been Paul's weekly report because the scores were great, and he even received full credit for his resubmitted work at the end of the semester instead of half credit because of the plagiarism from Wikipedia. Dr. Puta gave Paul a "B" in the class, without considering the fact that his opinion of Paul may have led to some negative and subjective grading of Paul's work. The only assumption left to make is that Dr. Puta expected Paul to perform lower than the rest of the class because he had the lowest academic status.

4) Answers may vary. Dr. Puta's negative behavior in class towards Paul lead the students in the class to sympathize with Paul after class, made students afraid to speak their minds openly because it could affect their grades, and by midterm, two students (50% of the class) went to other members of the department to complain about Dr. Puta's teaching and grading styles. The fact that other students expressed sympathy for a fellow student indicates that the abuse and disrespect from the professor must have been excessive, frequent, and undeserved. The very fact that the students refused to be witnesses or even speak up for Paul could reflect how Paul was eventually treated by other students during class. Paul admitted that he felt lonely and neglected. The fact that there was some discomfort among all the students because of Dr. Puta's class facilitation shows that the quality of their learning may have been affected psychologically. During class, in front of Dr. Puta, it was not beneficial for other students to support Paul's opinions, even if they agreed with him. Paul became afraid to speak up or ask questions in order to avoid Dr. Puta's claims that his responses were inadequate. When discussion, class participation, or even attendance become an issue because of the actions of the professor, active learning is endangered.

5) Answers may vary. Students should have stood up and spoken up concerning their right to an active learning environment. Education, evaluation, assessments, class participation, class attendance, punctuality, as well as being civil in class are all about learning, not grades. To put grades above learning defeats the purpose of the educational experiences for self development and career development. To allow a professor to undermine a fellow classmate unjustly to the point that he is scared to participate in class or to the point that others are scared to become his witness to class incivility because of a grade is not only a dishonor to the active learning environment, but also evidence of poor class facilitation and management on the part of the professor. Students should be encouraged to speak up from grade school onward about what is wrong in the classroom to the appropriate authority at all times. The professor as well as the department chair should be notified about issues like these through documented e-mails with classmates as witnesses. Then, the outcome should be more about enhancing the active learning environment than punishing the professor so that all students may have adequate access to a meaningful education through active or engaged learning.