



GEORGE SMITH

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George is a 28-year-old white male graduate student working on a Ph.D. in English, and he's been teaching composition courses for over two years. He has taught the required first-year composition course for four semesters running, but this is his first experience teaching technical writing, a general education course that most engineering and science majors are required to take. George is a soft-spoken man, but he loves teaching and his students generally like and respect him. His colleagues have told him, however, that technical writing students can be more independent and challenging than first-year students, although they are generally hardworking. Undergraduates cannot take technical writing until the beginning of their junior year, and many wait until they are seniors; hence, they often arrive feeling some resentment about having to take a general education writing course at the end of their program, especially if they have already taken writing intensive courses in their majors. George thinks he can handle these students, but he isn't prepared for the overt challenge he is faced with one day after classes have been in session for about a month.

On Fridays, students exchange homework exercises and complete a simple peer review as George walks around the classroom noting in his grade book who has completed the exercises and who has not. One Friday, this routine activity came to a standstill when George asked to look at Jonathan's homework. Jonathan is a bright, ambitious, confident 22-year-old engineering senior. Like George, he is white and comes from a well-educated family. In response to George's question, Jonathan explains that he has diligently completed his homework, as usual, but that he has accidentally left it in his apartment. Jonathan asks if he can leave class immediately to retrieve the homework and promises that he will return in less than 20 minutes. George reminds Jonathan that homework is due at the beginning of class and that he should simply remember to bring it next time. When Jonathan protests, George says, "Your feedback on others' work is more important at the moment than your demonstrating completion of this particular homework assignment. You will have many other opportunities to get credit for your work."

Clearly irritated, Jonathan then accuses his classmate, Christy, of hastily completing her homework at the beginning of class while George was making announcements. He complains, furthermore, that it isn't fair for Christy to receive credit for a sloppy job while he has done a thorough job and is being punished because he had accidentally left his work at home.

By this time, Christy is red-faced, and with a combination of astonishment and anger in her voice, she denies Jonathan's accusations without looking directly at either him or George. Meanwhile, Jonathan has abruptly pushed back his chair and stormed out of the classroom saying, "I'll be back in 20 minutes!" Other students in the class are visibly shaken. Clearly, they expect George to do something about this trouble-maker, Jonathan.

For a few seconds, all George can think is, "How could such a nice, conscientious student turn against me and the class so quickly? What did I do wrong?"

Questions About Smith Case

1. As the teacher and implicit keeper of order, what does George owe Jonathan in this situation? What does he owe Christy? Other members of the class? Himself? What opportunity does the situation give him to establish or stress priorities quite different from those of Jonathan and perhaps of other students as well?
2. How would you evaluate George's initial responses to Jonathan's request? In hindsight, should he have said or done anything different?
3. Despite the fact that George is feeling threatened by Jonathan, it's also clear that he has not considered Jonathan to be a disruptive student prior to this incident--quite the contrary. How can he use his prior good experience with the student to advantage?
4. What seems to have empowered Jonathan to challenge George's authority and insult his classmate, Christy? What role does privilege play in this scenario?
5. Why is George so stunned that a student like Jonathan could act in this way? Is Jonathan's behavior really so unusual?