

Jeremy Robinson

Jeremy Robinson is a third year graduate student in Statistics. Jeremy has been a TA for the introductory statistics course for the past three semesters, because of his experience, was assigned as a TA for a new assistant professor, Dr. Armstrong. Dr. Armstrong has previously taught Introductory Statistics at his former institution, and was looking forward to teaching it again with a seasoned TA.

One day during lecture, Jeremy noticed that several students were not following the example Dr. Armstrong was going over. He heard them whispering thing like “I have no idea what he is talking about.” Jeremy raised his hand and said “I’m getting the sense people aren’t following. Sometimes using the computational formula makes it tougher to understand. If you use the conceptual formula, they might find it more intuitive.” Several students whispered that they were in agreement. Dr. Armstrong felt flustered by being put on the spot, and said “Well, let me just get through this, and we’ll see if there are any questions at the end.” Several students sighed in frustration. After class Jeremy received several emails asking for help. Jeremy invited them to his office hours to show them the conceptual formula.

Later that day, Dr. Armstrong took Jeremy aside and said that he felt that interrupting the class as he did was inappropriate, particularly because it seemed to challenge his teaching methods in front of the class. Jeremy apologized profusely and said that he was just trying to help the students understand the topic. Changing the subject, Dr. Armstrong told Jeremy that he would be emailing him a copy of the upcoming exam. Would he please read it over for typos and have 42 copies made?

In reading over the exam, Jeremy found that several questions were confusing. Several questions seemed to have more than one correct answer. Jeremy did his best to clarify these questions, and also fixed the typos. He emailed the exam to Dr. Armstrong and wrote that he made some corrections to the exam content as well as the typos. Dr. Armstrong replied saying he had used the exam for years with no problems, and except for the typos, to please make copies of it as written.

The class took the exam and received their scores a couple of days later. The class average was a 71, which was consistent with what Dr. Armstrong had previously found. Still during class, several students were grumbling that the test was too difficult, and complained that several questions had more than one correct answer.

Later that day a student came to Jeremy’s office hours complaining about Dr. Armstrong. The student said “Dr. Armstrong is the worst professor I ever had. He can’t teach and his tests are really confusing. I mean didn’t you think that test was confusing?” Jeremy said he agreed that the test was difficult. He asked what he could do to help. The student said “Have the professor fired and teach the class.” Jeremy laughed and said that really wouldn’t be possible.

Later that day Jeremy received an email from Dr. Armstrong. In it, he forwarded an email he received from the student Jeremy met with. It read “Dear Dr. Armstrong, I am very upset about my grade in the class. I attend every class and take notes, but do poorly on your tests, which I think are VERY unfair and confusing. I spoke to the TA about it today and he told me that he agrees.”

Questions about the Robinson Case

1. What are some of the unique challenges of Jeremy's position as a TA?
2. Jeremy was clearly trying to help students when they were confused during lecture. What other ways could he have addressed the situation?
3. In the case, students went to Jeremy to complain about Dr. Armstrong. Did he handle the complaints appropriately? What, if anything could he have done differently to prevent the kind of email the student sent to Dr. Armstrong?