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The Case of Edwina Armstrong

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Pace University

Edwina Armstrong, assistant professor of psychology, pushed her glasses up into her hair and massaged the bridge of her nose as she listened to Shirlee Jasper's complaints.

"There's a problem here that I don't understand. I never even heard of an RW grade before. I have a 3.3 average, and I'm set to graduate in May. Why are you doing this to me?"

Edwina had only learned of the RW grade herself this past fall. This was her third year at Metropolitan University, a private college of about 16,000 students located in a large urban center in the northeastern part of the country. While having lunch in the faculty room in September, an English professor had suggested to a colleague in the economics department that he give a student with poor writing skills a grade of RW. When Edwina had asked what that stood for, the English professor had said, "It means 'remedial/writing'—the student has to spend a semester in the writing center with a tutor. When you give an RW grade, you are expected to send examples of the student's work along with your comments to the writing center. After the student completes whatever remedial work the director and the tutor have assigned, the RW grade is changed to the letter grade you would have assigned. So, if you would have given a student a B if his writing weren't so dreadful, you assign an RW-B. If the student doesn't go to the writing center, the RW become an F. It's a pretty big incentive to the students to come to the center. There's also RR, for remedial/reading, and RM, for remedial/math. Students

then have to go to the skills center for tutoring in reading comprehension or math. Usually, only the computer and economics people give RM grades.”

When Edwina checked, she discovered that all the remedial grades were explained in the faculty handbook, in the student handbook and in the university catalog. “It was the kind of thing you would miss, if you weren’t looking for it,” she thought, since for two years she had been unaware that she had the RW or RR option.

Now, she found herself saying to Shirlee, “The RW grade is explained in the catalog. If you didn’t know what it meant, why did you wait until March to ask me about it? You’ve had your grades since January. When I turned in grades, I sent samples of your work and my assignments to the writing center. I expected you to follow up.”

Shirlee responded, “I’ve come by your office a couple of times, but you were never here. This is the first time you’ve been here.”

Edwina resisted the temptation to tell the student that her office hours were posted on her door and that the student could have phoned the department and left a message if she had really wanted to talk with her. Telling the student what she should have done wasn’t going to have much payoff at this point. Instead, she repeated her earlier comments.

“Shirlee, every time you turned in a paper last semester, I told you that you had a problem with your writing. The RW grade should not have come as a surprise.”

“How come no one else ever gave me an RW? I have a 3.3 average, and no one ever said I had a writing problem before you.”

“What’s your major?”

“Information systems.”

“Don’t you have to write papers for your courses?”

“Not really. The last papers I wrote were in my com and lit courses.”

“And how did you do in those courses?”

“OK. I got Cs, I think.”

“Then, how could you have a 3.3?”

“I took them at the community college before I transferred here. Transfer grades don’t count in your average. My IS grades are all As and Bs.”

“Shirlee, I think you have a problem with writing. I don’t see how you’ll be able to hold a job unless your skills improve dramatically. It would be terrible to let you graduate thinking you have all the skills you need when your writing is so poor.”

“Look, that’s just your opinion. And, I’m not sure you know what good writing is. You’re a psychology professor, not English.”

“Shirlee, I’m willing to let someone in the English department read your

work and decide if I'm right or not. I don't think it's fair to you to not deal with this."

"What's not fair would be to keep me from graduating, just because you don't like the way I write."

"Liking how you write is not the issue. The issue is . . ."

"Sure it is. How many RWs did you give last semester?"

"I'm not sure. Why does that matter? The only one that matters is the one I gave to you."

"You gave seven RWs out of nineteen students in the class. What do you think that says? That one-third of the class are bad writers or that you don't like the way they write?"

"I guess it says that I care about the quality of students' writing. Writing is a reflection of students' thinking. It's an essential tool skill. You need to learn to be a better writer."

"Are you telling me you aren't going to let me graduate until I take a writing course?"

"Perhaps we can work something out. There are still two months until graduation."

Shirlee was out of her chair before Edwina had finished her sentence. "No way, lady." she said as she left Edwina's office.

Two days later, John Chambliss, chair of the psychology department, stopped by Edwina's office.

"Have a minute?"

"Sure, John. Come on in." Edwina lifted a pile of student papers from the only chair in her tiny office and motioned for him to sit down.

"We have a problem, Eddy."

John looked so serious that Edwina immediately repressed the temptation to joke about his use of "we." Instead she asked, "What's up?"

"Shirlee Jasper came to see me. It seems that she's checked into the RW grades you gave last semester. She's pretty upset."

"I know. I saw her on Monday. What do you mean, she checked the grades?"

"Did you realize that you gave RW grades only to minority and foreign students?"

Edwina paused. Then, slowly, she responded, "No . . . actually, I hadn't thought about it. I was teaching the Psych of Adjustment class, and I required a lot of papers. I had just found out about the RW grade, and it seemed like a good option for students who were having problems expressing themselves in writing. I didn't analyze who those students were by color or anything."

"Well, Shirlee did. It seems that three of the RWs went to African-

American students, two were Hispanic, one was from Egypt, and one from Korea.”

“Oh, damn. You know, John, I really thought I was doing the best thing for the students. None of the seven could write worth a damn. I thought I was doing them a favor. If I had graded them on their work alone, most would have gotten Ds. This way I could grade them without punishing them for poor writing skills. Boy, was I wrong.”

“I don’t think you were wrong. I agree with you that students need to be able to write. It seems to me that lots of my students don’t write well. I should probably use the RW grade myself.”

“But, Shirlee’s making it sound like my behavior was racist.”

“Shirlee’s argument is that you don’t like how minority students write. She said something about you expecting them to conform to a standard that was unacceptable to people of color.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, John. You know me better than that.”

“Of course I do. I didn’t say that. I was just telling you what Shirlee said. And, the evidence she has accumulated is compelling.”

“I guess I’m in real trouble, huh?”

“I don’t know. I think we need to figure out how to handle this before it blows up into a major issue. At least Shirlee’s going through channels. She started with you and then came to me. We need to resolve it before she takes it to anyone else.” Chambliss paused, and Edwina knew he was trying to figure out what to do. After a minute, he asked, “Have you given RW grades before?”

“This is the first semester I’ve used the option.”

“Did you give them in your other classes?”

“Not in my two intro sections—I use multiple choice exams there. But, I did give some in my social psych class.”

“To minority students?”

“I’ll have to check to be sure, but I don’t think you’re going to like what I find.”

“Why don’t you confirm those grades and get back to me. It would be good if there wasn’t a pattern. And then we’ll have to figure out what to do, since Shirlee isn’t going to let this rest, and I told her I’d get back to her within the week. I’m not sure what action will satisfy her at this point, but we’ve got to come up with something.”

Edwina nodded, and John stood up and headed for the door. Edwina stopped him. “John, the students I gave RW grades to really couldn’t write.”

John paused in the doorway of her office. “I don’t doubt that, Eddy. But the question people will ask is: Could all of your white students write?”

Use of the Case entitled “Edwina Armstrong”

Like the other cases in this series, “Edwina Armstrong” was developed to be discussed in a faculty development experience. Its purpose is to stimulate faculty members to reflect critically on Edwina’s situation and to share with colleagues their thoughts about the issues raised by the case. The case was written to encourage experienced college faculty to reflect on their own teaching practices and to use this critical reflection as a guide to an analysis of this situation and to suggestions for what good college teaching practices should apply here.

To do this in a discussion format requires that the discussion leader plan carefully how she/he will lead the discussion. We suggest that there are four elements of pre-discussion planning for the case discussion leader—determining the **teaching/learning objectives**; understanding the **blocks of discussion**—the issues the case raises—and deciding which of these blocks she/he wishes to emphasize; planning a **question outline**—a set of questions that will encourage discussion of key issues and that will lead to achieving the teaching objectives; and planning a **board outline**—a plan for what the chalkboard or flip charts might look like at the end of the discussion. Although no good discussion can be controlled so that it proceeds as neatly as one’s plans, a good general framework to have in mind in any problem-centered case like this one is to: 1) determine the facts; 2) identify the problems; 3) suggest solutions, both short and long-term; and 4) evaluate the solutions. If the discussion leader can lay this framework over the objectives, blocks of discussion, question and board outlines, he/she will have captured the essence of pre-planning for a case discussion.

To illustrate, we can imagine that we wanted to use this case to encourage faculty to think more critically about cultural diversity on our campus. The blocks of discussion might be:

- Grading
- Changing grades
- Special grade for writing—RW
- Writing
- How to recognize bad writing
- How to teach good writing
- Faculty-student relations
- Teaching practices
- Feedback to students
- Student conferencing
- Faculty-administration relations
- Racism

It might be best to start the discussion with a broad, fact-seeking, problem-identification question. "Our heroine here, Edwina Armstrong, thinks she may be 'in real trouble.' Is she? Should she be worried about this situation?" Such a question will lead to responses that will elicit the facts of the case (main players and their relationships, grading system information, remedial writing system, course information, etc.) and that will expose the wide variety of issues the case raises. Questions in the solution/evaluation stage would press on Shirlee's charge of racism. "Now that we understand better what is going on in this situation, what do you think of Shirlee's charge of racism? How would you suggest Edwina answer her? Edwina's chair, John Chambliss, seems inclined to pacify Shirlee. What do you do about that? What if Shirlee goes to the Dean? How does Edwina defend herself? Does she want this battle to be escalated?" To keep track of all this, the board categories might be:

- Situation
- Problems
- Actions

We would encourage you to try leading a discussion of the case using your own objectives and your own set of questions. If the case is rich enough, there will be many ways to organize a discussion. We wish you lively and productive discussions!