

The Incident

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During 1972, my second year of teaching high school mathematics, the Vietnam War was going full tilt and clothing was big and baggy. Some students smoked in the “smoking lounge,” an outdoor section of sidewalk roped off and relatively out of sight, while a few others fled to the forest preserve adjacent to our campus to smoke pot during lunch hours. Faculty cigarette smoking was commonplace in both the teachers’ lounge and the faculty cafeteria, the cheerleading squad had a waiting list, and it was skirts-only for female teachers.

In retrospect it seemed to be a more relaxed time in our school for both students and teachers. A math teacher could teach a class with just a piece of chalk, a blackboard, and a lesson plan and feel as though she had engaged the students in significant learning. More recently it seems that we have felt compelled to have a daily opener, a cooperative learning activity that preferably has a discovery activity and an “Aha” moment, some graphing calculator work, maybe some computer modeling, and hopefully some reflective writing—all in the framework of a 40-minute period.

Still, “the incident” in 1972 is a memory so vivid that it could have happened yesterday. The room, the students involved, the time of day, the words that came out of my mouth all remain in stark relief. It took only a minute to happen, but my anguished feelings and the fear of a premature dismissal consumed me for the better part of that school day and remained in my thoughts in a toe-curling fashion long afterward.

So what was the incident that so rattled me so many years ago? It occurred in the morning of a fall day during my remedial freshman algebra class. We were in a room on the second floor of the science/mathematics building facing south toward the forest. A handful of students were at the board working problems while their classmates were doing the same at their seats. Tom was shy, of a slight build and young for this group of freshmen. I had been unable to draw him out in class, much less have him work a problem on the board. I was pleased that he was willing to stand in front of the class and take a public risk, but I tried my best not to show it. Next to him was Joel. Joel was big, tended to be boisterous, sometimes immature, occasionally difficult. He always enjoyed

the attention of the class. Both boys worked problems. Tom finished his first and with the faintest of smiles (at least it seemed to me) took his seat. Joel finished, and as he passed the board, he swiped an eraser down through Tom's work, obliterating half of it.

I was outraged. It took so much effort to get Tom to participate this once, and then this happened. I do not remember exactly what I said to Joel in front of the class, but I do know that my comments were angry, unpleasant and involved the word "jerk."

Thankfully class was over in a few minutes, and I collected my things and went back to my office. There I replayed what happened over and over in my mind. Each time I got to the "jerk" part, I began to change the focus from Tom and Joel to what I had done. And then I began to think about what came out of my mouth. Did I really call a freshman student a "jerk" in front of the entire class? How could I have acted so unprofessionally?

Then I began to wonder what I should do. I thought that perhaps I could confide in one of the veteran teachers and ask her advice, but it would take more courage than I could muster to admit to a colleague what I had done. I was the rookie in the department; I needed collegial respect. My department chair was very kind and a wise sort of person, but how could I admit to him what a bonehead I was after he went out on a limb and hired me? Certainly, this was a fireable offense, ridiculing a student **IN FRONT OF THE CLASS**. I had no defense, no justification. It occurred to me that Joel might go home and **TELL HIS PARENTS!** I envisioned my resume going up in flames.

Somehow I got through the rest of my classes, but by the end of the day I was at my wit's end. I decided that I would find Joel and apologize to him before he went home. Perhaps I could get some mercy. I checked his schedule and nervously waited outside his last-period class. The bell rang, and as Joel walked out of the room I got his attention. He was surprised to see me, and I was surprised to see a smile on his face. Thrown off guard a bit, I made my apology. He stared blankly at me. Finally, he said he didn't remember the class situation, much less my response, shrugged his shoulders, and walked off.

That was the end of "the incident," but even as I write about it I am astonished that I can still feel the angst of that day more than that at any other point in my teaching career. Sometimes I wonder how the ending might have been different at other times during more than three decades as an educator. To be sure, a similar incident might play out in exactly the same way. Or, more likely, not. Now, even the most thoughtful and

constructive criticism of a student's work or behavior may sometimes be misunderstood, causing backlash for a well-meaning teacher.