

Paul Seymour, Assistant Professor: A Dilemma Case in Teaching

by

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The numbers were staring him in the face. Paul Seymour looked at them again, irritated and troubled. A third of the semester was over in his Molecular Evolution course, and he had just taken his first survey of the students' reaction. Now the results were in. There was no avoiding it. The students weren't happy. They didn't like the new teaching methods he had introduced. The students weren't used to working in collaborative groups. They didn't want discussion. They didn't like group papers or group tests, or case studies. They simply wanted the facts. As one intense young man had told him:

"You're getting paid to teach us, and all you do is stand around. We do all the work. How can I fill out an evaluation for you? You aren't doing anything."

Paul Seymour had finished his Ph.D. three years ago at Duke University with the world renowned Torkel Gustafson, arguably the generation's best physiological ecologist. From there he traveled to Johns Hopkins for a postdoc with Mary Craxton, whose DNA fingerprinting work on coral reefs had garnered both excellent reviews and scholarly recognition. Paul's research credentials were impeccable. In his short career he was fortunate enough to have published ten papers, two of which had appeared in *Nature* and one in *Science*. He was on his way. In fact, he had thought more than once of a fellow postdoc's comment. Fred Smothers, a graduate of Cornell University, used to say, "If you haven't made it by the time you have been out 10 years, you aren't going to make it." Well, by that criterion, Paul had made it. Here he was recently hired in Chicago, his research career was beckoning and yet...

Paul had discovered the joys of teaching. His undergraduate days had been spent at Colorado College, where excellent teaching was the norm. The reason he had gone to graduate school was because a young assistant professor had taken enough personal interest in him.

At Duke, Paul had been a teaching assistant and found that he loved to explain things. His research seminars were always enjoyable to prepare and give. He received well deserved compliments on his clever presentations. Perhaps his colleagues were right. He was a born teacher.

At Johns Hopkins the die was cast. Dr. Mary Craxton, his postdoc mentor, had been recently experimenting with a new teaching method she had seen. She called it collaborative learning. Students worked in teams on projects and received group grades. Not a lot of lecturing occurred in Mary's classes, but discussion was intense. Paul started attending Mary's classes when his research permitted. He soon found himself a regular participant. The discussion method of teaching Advanced Molecular Biology seemed intriguing. He was determined to try it when he got his own classes.

The State University at Chicago was perhaps not the ideal place to try collaborative learning, but Paul thought he could manage it if he prepared ahead. After having his first semester off to set up his lab, Paul thought he was ready to teach Molecular Evolution. His class consisted of 40 juniors, most of them pre-med students who had survived organic chemistry last year and were looking ahead to the agonizing MCATs.

Paul could still remember that first day when he explained the course rules: 50% of the course would be individual work and 50% group scores, with peer evaluation being part of the grade. He was met with skepticism and even downright hostility. Today, five weeks later, he was having second thoughts. The students weren't happy. And it was clear they had been talking to other faculty: some of his new colleagues in the Department of Integrative Biology had made passing comments to him. The Chairman, Distinguished Professor David Montague, seemed to have heard things as well, for he was more than casually interested in the fact that Paul didn't seem to be getting much grant writing done. Paul was feeling pretty depressed.

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