

The extra credit activist

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Dr Jon Fairplay has just put the finishing touches on the syllabus for his undergraduate wetland ecology class. Instead of doing rote labs, Jon wants to try something new. The class will be divided into groups, and each group will work on a research project for most of the term. Jon will have students present their work at a student research fair, which will be open to the public. Jon has five potential projects ready to go, all centered around Atwater Marsh, a local estuarine salt marsh. The marsh is city property and the city also owns several adjoining parcels of land. This area is currently undeveloped, but a developer is proposing to build shore-view condos on the site. Jon hopes that the student projects will show the ecological value of the site and help the newly formed “Friends of Atwater Marsh (FOAM)” fight the developer.

Q: What potentially competing values (and stakeholders) should Jon consider when planning this assignment?

Q: Will all relevant stakeholders share the same values?

Q: How could Jon plan this assignment to avoid ethical missteps?

The semester is almost over and many of Jon’s students are excited that their data may help protect the local environment. Yesterday, a pro-development editorial appeared in the school paper. The author of the editorial isn’t in Jon’s class, and is apparently ignorant of many aspects of wetland ecology. Jon decided that the editorial presented another opportunity to put his student’s scientific skills to the test. The next day, Jon offered extra credit to any member of his class who sends a well-reasoned, scientifically-based response to Jon and to the editor. The following week, two of the best letters from Jon’s students appear in the paper, and the remaining letters are posted to the FOAM website. All of the letters are against development. Jon is elated, and he proudly shows the letters to his grad students. “Look at these letters – especially Jenna’s. This is exactly what I hoped to see”.

Meanwhile, in a bar near campus, two of Jon’s Wetland Ecology students, Jenna and Alicia, are discussing Jenna’s letter. “Jenna, how could you write that letter?” asks Alicia. “You know our dads really need the construction work that the condo project would bring. You’ve told me more than once that you hope the condos get built!” Jenna replies, “I know. But I’m right on the A/B border in that class and need that extra credit”. Alicia is not convinced. “Fairplay didn’t say you had to write a ‘save the marsh’ reply, he just wanted a scientifically well-supported reply”, she points out. “Are you kidding?”, Jenna responds. “It’s obvious which side of the debate Fairplay is on. He told us that part of the reason for having us work at the marsh was that the data might be used to support FOAM. I couldn’t take the chance of losing the points. I’ve got straight A’s except for this class and I’m up for the outstanding Junior award. Politics is not going to mess this up for me.”



Q: Does this extra-credit assignment pressure students into advocating a particular policy, regardless of their own opinions? If you think that the assignment is ethically sound as is, what minimal changes to the assignment would cross the line and make it too coercive? If you think the assignment is unethical as it stands, what minimal change would make the assignment ethically acceptable, but still an educationally valuable exercise in applied ecology?

Q: How far can we go in asking undergraduates to apply skills they are acquiring to controversial issues?

Q: What assignments constitute pedagogy that let students apply their skills to the “real world”?

Q: What constitutes the abuse of a professor’s authority over students in pursuit of a personal agenda?

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■ Commentary on “The extra credit activist”

Part one introduces the student projects. Having students collect and analyze data, and follow that analysis all the way through to a presentation, is a great idea for at least two reasons. Students will see that ecology is not just “stuff in a textbook”, but rather that ecological data are relevant to societal issues and can be used to improve a community’s decision-making process. Second, the American Association for the Advancement of Science recommends that courses “ought to be designed to explore the complexity of interpreting and evaluating data from various environments and to discover the limitations of scientific knowledge” (1990). The Atwater Marsh research projects strive to fulfill these goals. However, there are pitfalls to avoid.

One issue is the integrity of the data. The case doesn’t specify the prerequisites for taking Wetland Ecology, but most students will probably be novices at data collection and analysis. Novices are likely to make honest mistakes, and Jon will need to consider this limitation when reporting these data. If the data are made public, a student’s competence and motives may be publicly attacked, which should not be a likely outcome of doing their homework. Furthermore, students who know Jon’s position may be tempted to fudge the data, especially if they believe their work will be graded on the basis of how close their findings are to what they think the professor expects to see. Finally, suppose some students in the Wetlands Ecology class favor development and don’t want to work on the marsh projects. Should Jon create alternate projects for such students?

Jon might approach these issues by using this assignment as a tool to show the problems scientists face in balancing their dual role as scientist and citizen. Exposing this problem will help students to realize that it is faced by both those who are pro-Marsh and those who are pro-Condo. Teaching students that fair, objective science is challenging, but not insurmountable, is just as worthy a goal as teaching them about exponential growth and experimental controls. Acknowledging the tension that may result between the Atwater Marsh project data and peoples’ goals for the community may be a good way to convince students that their projects will be evaluated on scientific acumen alone. Jon should hold a discussion about research ethics and his expectations for the projects before the students begin. Jon will also need to state (both to the students and users of the data) that criticism of the projects should be directed at him, since he was the course instructor.

Part two of the case introduces the extra-credit assignment. We are purposely avoiding the question of whether extra credit is appropriate in college and the issue of grade inflation (though these make for lively discussion), in favor of issues involving the role of political beliefs and objectivity in grading. The AAUP’s statement on Freedom and Responsibility (1970) reads, in part: “The student should not be forced by the authority inherent in the instructional role to make particular personal choices as to political action or his own part in society. Evaluation of

students and the award of credit must be based on academic performance professionally judged and not on matters irrelevant to that performance, whether personality, race, religion, degree of political activism, or personal beliefs”. In asking the students to write the letters, has Jon used his position to force students into “political action”? Is he now awarding grades based, in part, on “political activism, or personal beliefs”?

Answering these questions isn’t easy. At least two factors are important: are students being pushed into public participation in the political process, and how are these letters going to be graded? And, crucially, what is the students’ perception of these factors? As you discuss this case, it may seem as though the issue of coercion isn’t germane. Jon isn’t requiring anyone to write (extra credit). However, a student who feels their grade is at stake may see this differently and may write the letter while fervently hoping it won’t be published (either because it doesn’t represent their opinion or because they don’t want to “go public”). Also, we don’t know how Jon plans to grade these letters. Jenna certainly doesn’t believe the extra-credit will be graded objectively. Most undergraduates regard lack of objectivity and criticism of all theoretical orientations except those personally held by the professor as unethical faculty behavior (Kuther 2003). Has Jon made it clear to the class how the letters are going to be graded? Jon may have said that the political position expressed doesn’t affect the grade (and Jenna just wasn’t listening) or Jon may have assumed that it is so obvious it didn’t need to be said. How can Jon make this assignment more sensitive to the fact that this issue is controversial and that there are competing value frameworks that can be applied? Some suggestions: Jon could have the “letters” sent just to him and after credit is awarded, Jon could make an in-class announcement that students might consider sending their letters to the editor or to FOAM. Jon could also make a grading rubric available when he gives the assignment. The rubric provides students with a breakdown of exactly how Jon intends to grade the letters. Jon could make it clear, in writing, that both pro- and anti-development letters can receive full credit if the criteria are met.

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■ References

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This is the last in our Ethical Issues series. For the introduction, please see the August 2003 issue (7: 330–33).