



The Ethics of Challenging the Attitudes and Experiences of Students

Joy Gasson, Rene Smit

Otago Polytechnic
Dunedin, New Zealand

joyg@tekotago.ac.nz

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The Gender discussion paper, in the CS106 Computers and Society course of the BInfoTech, requires students to examine their attitudes to gender and inclusion at a personal level. The rationale has been that any opinion on a gender or equity issue emanates from a belief system and from past experiences.

The first class, presented by a female lecturer, exposed students to the range of information and discussion. Why do females account for only 20% of our intake in the BInfoTech programme at the Otago Polytechnic? Is there a gender difference in the attraction to and use of computer technologies? What are the differences between male and female graduate pay rates? Does current research on gender issues reflect the attitudes and experiences of our students?

The second class was taken by a male lecturer, in an attempt to present the discussion from another perspective. He talked about men's rights in New Zealand in the past and looked at current legislation. The discussion set out to be contentious, as a method of challenging students to form and defend their point of view in the written assignment.

Some weeks later, a female student found she was enrolled in another paper with the male lecturer. She stated to the Head of School that she was unable to attend that lecturer's class, as the issues raised in the lecture brought back experiences from her past that she has tried, but not been able to deal with.

In education, it is generally accepted, as being healthy and constructive, to challenge the thinking and beliefs of students. The question is whether it is ethical to challenge

students at a level where experiences of abuse may surface. Do we as educators have the right to expect students to be able to address every aspect of their past? Is it not a denial of the extent and impact of abuse to expect every student to have brought closure to such experiences?

Maybe we should issue a prior warning at the beginning of the course, as happens in some counselling courses. A proviso in the course outline might say, 'There are some aspects of this course that will challenge personal opinions, that at times students may not feel comfortable. In challenging your opinions and belief systems, the course seeks to raise awareness on gender and inclusion issues, and to clarify and develop student thinking.'

As educators, we must be aware of the possible implications of such discussions. Should we temper or even avoid these discussions? Is this a reasoned response or are we over reacting and attempting to be overly politically correct? In a work situation how will these students react to a personal grievance case laid on the basis of gender issues?

By avoiding discussion, are we not imposing censorship? How can we broach this issue while maintaining sensitivity to a student's personal reality?

This poster paper raises issues we have to face on an ongoing basis, an ethical challenge indeed. We look forward to discussing these questions further with interested parties.

