

The February 21st Demonstration: Bailey's Account

I teach a large (nearly 600 person) human sexuality class at Northwestern University. During class I lecture about the science of sexuality. Many days after class I organize optional events. These events primarily comprise speakers addressing interesting aspects of sexuality. This year, for example, we have had a panel of gay men speaking about their sex lives, a transsexual performer, two convicted sex offenders, an expert in female sexual health and sexual pleasure, a plastic surgeon, a swinging couple, and the February 21st panel led by Ken Melvoin-Berg, on “networking for kinky people.” These events are entirely optional, they are not covered on exams, and I arrange them at considerable investment of my time, for which I receive no compensation from Northwestern University. The students find the events to be quite valuable, typically, because engaging real people in conversation provides useful examples and extensions of concepts students learn about in traditional academic ways.

I recruited Ken Melvoin-Berg (Ken MB henceforth) because past speakers covering similar topics had not been very interesting—they had merely given powerpoint presentations, of which students get too many already. They were also unwilling to answer questions about their sex lives, which defeated the purpose of that particular presentation. I had met Ken and believe he is articulate, open, knowledgeable, entertaining, and yes, kinky. Sexual diversity is surely a reasonable thing to address in a human sexuality class. I certainly had no hesitation inviting Ken MB, and I asked him whether he could recruit others, as well, to give the presentation. (I especially thought it would be useful to have a woman as well as a man.)

On the afternoon of February 21st Ken MB and colleagues arrived while I was finishing my lecture, on sexual arousal. I was talking about the female g-spot and the phenomenon of female ejaculation, both of which are scientifically controversial. I finished the lecture and invited the guests onstage. On the way, Ken asked me whether it would be ok if one of the women with him demonstrated female ejaculation using equipment they had brought with them. I hesitated only briefly before saying “yes.” My hesitation concerned the likelihood that many people would find this inappropriate. My decision to say “yes” reflected my

inability to come up with a legitimate reason why students should not be able to watch such a demonstration. After all, those still there had stayed for an optional demonstration/lecture about kinky sex and were told explicitly what they were about to see. The demonstration, which included a woman who enjoyed public sexual interaction with a machine, surely counts as kinky, and hence as relevant. Furthermore, earlier that day in my lecture I had talked about the attempts to silence sex research, and how this largely reflected sex negativity. I have had previous experiences with these silencing attempts myself. I did not wish, and I do not wish, to surrender to sex negativity and fear.

Ken MB and friends spoke to the class for a while and then informed students they were about to perform their demonstration. The presentation seemed to have lasted about 5-10 minutes of their hour-long presentation. While I watched, I experienced some apprehension. None of this apprehension had to do with the possibility of harm to any observer, and none of it had to do with a lack of educational value. As I alluded, some experiences are educational and interesting in non-traditional ways. Rather, I was worried that there could be repercussions that would threaten the valuable speaker series that I have built over the years.

Student feedback for this event (I routinely collect feedback for all events) was uniformly positive. Although most students mentioned the explicit demonstration—which they enjoyed and thought was a singular college experience—most also said that the most valuable part was engaging in a dialogue with Ken MB et al.

Do I have any regrets? It is mostly too early to say. I certainly have no regrets concerning Northwestern students, who have demonstrated that they are open-minded grown ups rather than fragile children. I have not enjoyed the press, because I have assumed that reporters will sensationalize what happened and will not provide my side. (A welcome exception to this, mostly, was the *Daily Northwestern* article.) I suspect that my Dean is not enjoying this publicity, and I do not like displeasing my Dean.

To the extent that this event provokes a discussion of my reasoning, above, I welcome it. I expect many people to disagree with me.

Thoughtful discussion of controversial topics is a cornerstone of learning

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