

Case #8: Jennifer O'Connor

Assistant Professor Jennifer O'Connor stood confidently in front of her class of sixty-five students at a Midwestern community college. She was well prepared to discuss what she thought would be an interesting topic related to current events.

Jennifer often exposed her students to facts and ideas that were new to them. This strategy engaged her students in the course content. Today's section on the sexual reproduction of plants and animals was filled with facts that students often found surprising. For example, a lively discussion usually ensued when Jennifer mentioned species, such as spiders, that had unusual gender roles.

Standing in front of the chalkboard, Jennifer greeted her students. "Today," she said, "we will be discussing the reproductive patterns of many different species. As we focus on the diversity of these behaviors, consider how these adaptations may be useful within the ecosystem each species inhabits. Let's begin with the seahorse." Jennifer cued up her slide projector and showed an image of a male seahorse with a pouch on his belly. Her next slide juxtaposed the seahorse with a female kangaroo. Jennifer discussed the reproductive behavior of each species.

Jennifer turned back to the class before moving to the next slide. "Does anyone know of a species – other than humans – where some individuals form life-long same-sex partnerships?"

There were some looks of disbelief on the faces of Jennifer's students. No one spoke up, but Jennifer could sense that her students were paying attention. Even the people in the back row had looked up. Jennifer thought that this would be a good teaching moment. She clicked the projector to the next image – a picture of a male duck. "Several species of ducks, for example..."

Jennifer went on to describe the mate selection and longevity of these same-sex partnerships in the animal kingdom. "These partnerships are an example of the occurrence of homosexuality in nature," she explained. The class listened attentively, taking notes, and no one voiced any concern – at the time.

Jennifer was surprised when, several weeks later, she found a letter tucked under her door. It was an anonymous letter from a parent of one of the students in her biology course. The letter decried her attempts to "poison young minds." "We, as parents, should not have to pay this high tuition to have someone shove the homosexual agenda in our faces," the letter concluded. Jennifer was further dismayed to read that a copy had been sent to her dean.

Jennifer was not sure what to do. She was concerned that this letter could affect her upcoming third year review – a crucial step in her tenure process.