



JOHN CLOSE

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As a new instructor for the department's undergraduate social geography course, John Close was determined not to do the same old things in class. He remembered how bored he'd been as a student and had tried to come up with a variety of approaches to the different issues the class needed to cover. Making his lectures interesting and getting students to participate whenever possible were a critical part of his course plan.

One thing John liked about his class was that it was relatively small and included a mix of students; three were African American, and altogether roughly half of them were women. As far as John was concerned that was good because he wanted to encourage perspectives other than that of the traditional white male. He also wanted to include discussions on topics of current interest such as the urban underclass and the racist right. So when he came up with the idea of having student groups take turns being on panels, researching topics, and discussing them in front of the class, he thought he'd really hit on something great. That would give him the opportunity to combine student participation and expose the class to multiple viewpoints.

After the first week of class John decided to assign students to panels so that they could start working on the assignment. He divided the class into groups of four and handed out discussion topics, assigning one white student and the three African Americans to the group investigating the urban underclass.

The next day one of the students in the group working on the underclass came to his office hours. The woman, whose name was Gwen, felt that she and the other two African Americans had been singled out for the group; she also said that she resented the implication that "all blacks must know about the underclass," and they should "speak for their race." In addition, Gwen was really interested in pursuing another topic. She proposed that the groups be changed and she be allowed to work on another issue. John disagreed because he didn't feel like he'd "singled out" any of the students, and one goal of the project was to research and prepare an argument on a topic that might not necessarily be of interest to the individual concerned. His decision was to keep the groups as they stood. Gwen left still fuming.

Later that week another person came in to see John. This time, however, it was Steve, the only white student in the group researching the underclass. Steve also had concerns about being in the group, but they revolved around feelings of discomfort and alienation. After a few study sessions he was feeling left out because the other three students talked all the time and he didn't feel comfortable giving his opinion on any of the issues. One reason was that the other students spent a lot of time discussing racism and the types of discrimination that occur in current society.

Another reason was that he thought they might be presenting a biased view of the issue because they were minorities, thereby potentially giving the rest of the class a distorted picture. Steve wasn't sure where the project was going, was unenthusiastic about the topic, and didn't think his staying in the group would help anyone. After asking to be switched to a different group he left, leaving John confused and worried that what had started as a simple teaching technique had become a problem for everyone.

Questions About Close Case

1. What are the pros and cons of John assigning all of the African Americans to the panel on the underclass?
2. Do you think that Gwen was justified in her angry reaction to the group assignment?
3. What should John tell Steve as the only white member of the group?
4. Should John discuss with anyone Steve's concern that the other students might be biased? If so, with whom? Would it help to talk to Steve alone, to all four group members together, and/or to the entire class?