

THE TWO SIDES OF A LESSON

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Today marks my third year working as a lecturer in a local university in Malaysia. It has been a hectic yet a memorable experience for me as I have been so passionate about teaching. Looking at how I have grown in this field has made me realise that many things have changed me- not just as a person, but particularly as an educator. But then, as a human, I tend to make mistakes. A mistake where I thought I would never do. And somehow I accidentally became a person who thought I would never be- a judgmental person.

This particular incident happened during my second year of teaching. This was when I was assigned to teach Semantic class for that particular semester. As usual, there would be group assignments where the students were free to choose their group members for the project assigned. Everything went smoothly until I received a complaint from a student about her group members. Upon hearing the complaint, I felt irritated and annoyed to a point where I believed that no second chance should be given to the other two members. I had the thought of ignoring those two problematic girls in my class - and so I did. My anger has overcome my sanity as an educator. As far as I remember, the other two group members have always been active in class but knowing the fact that they were problematic, my perspective has changed in a jiffy.

Remembering myself as a student, I had also encountered heaps of problematic group members; some were lazy, happily being a third wheeler in the group, some were too demanding and perfectionist, some were bossy and yes, the list goes on. I wouldn't want these things to happen again. Not in my class, at least.

Time passed by, and surprisingly on a Friday evening, I received two unexpected guests in my office - the two problematic girls. I welcomed them and before they had the chance to talk, I asked, "So, what can I do for you? Is there anything that we should discuss?", along with my straight face. I could see both of them were taken aback with my questions and seemed so uncomfortable to start the conversation. Slowly and carefully, one of the girls, Sara said, "We have a little problem among our group members, and as far as I am concerned, I guess you know it well. I am not even sure what you have heard from her, (Gowrey was the student who made the complaint), but at least let us explain to you what really happened from the day we decided to take her as our group member and then you can decide."

Looking at these girls' sincerity, I told myself that maybe I was too hasty in my judgment, therefore, I let these two girls explain themselves. To my surprise, whatever I have heard from Gowrey was totally different from these girls' explanation. I even read their WhatsApp conversations which prove that I was on the wrong side, and to my surprise, Gowrey was the problematic one. She told me things which did not happen and claimed herself as the victim. Then, I just remembered the moment where Gowrey was reluctant to meet these two girls when I tried to mend things between them by asking her to bring her group members to my room to reconcile. It makes sense now seeing a clearer picture of her trying to defend herself while accusing others.

Days went by and it was time for the first presentation of the semester. During her presentation, I tried to act natural by asking questions and as I had expected, she failed to answer my questions regarding the project. She even stuttered and kept mumbling as if she had no idea what the task was all about and what she was assigned to. Her explanation was out of context and her mind seemed to not be there while answering my questions. After that huge gaffe, she immediately requested to change groups for the second project that I had approved since the beginning of the semester and I was convinced that the other group members must have prepared a lot for that project. I was furious, frustrated with Gowrey. But I let her be, hoping that she would do better with the new group members.

Again, I was wrong. Even after changing groups, I received another complaint about her. I was so disappointed but not surprised. Hence this time around, I took the high road. I didn't get mad. I asked and assessed her as fair as I could because I realised that I acted unprofessionally by punishing my students without having to listen to their side of the story. I have unintentionally troubled my own students with my behavior. As a lecturer, I should not have sided with anyone and I should be as neutral as I can.

And so, the biggest lesson I have learnt that semester and for the rest of my life is, there are always two sides of every story. Just because someone tells you one thing, that is not always true. Now, anytime I encounter a similar situation with my students, I always listen to both sides and try to seek out the truth because at the end of the day, I believe that if we are too quick at making judgments, then we will become part of the deceitful circus and end up being the fool. I want to inspire my students and always be there for them in any situation, be it right or wrong.

