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I Search Sexual Harassment

Rita E. Paye

My twelfth grade basic English class was a rowdy forum for sexual put-downs. Some violent eruptions led to suspension for both males and females. By chance, it was the year that Anita Hill made sexual harassment a topic in homes, offices, and classrooms throughout the country.

As a result, while my students pursued such topics as AIDS and child abuse for their "I search" topics, I decided to concentrate on sexual harassment. It had become clear to me that I knew much less than I had thought I did on the subject. More importantly, I hoped to educate my students as I learned and modeled research techniques. Naturally I hoped to impact their behavior.

I announced early and often to my students the topic of my search, my areas of question, and answers found. This gave them opportunity to discuss my issue and my methods, and direct my inquiry to a certain extent by helping me locate sources.

A counselor, who heard of my topic from a student, obtained an employee training film used by a local utility company. I found that many companies have training films dealing with issues related to the workplace, and they are generally willing to share them with outsiders if you can find the right person to ask—usually someone in personnel. As I insist my students do, because the topic contained the word "sexual," and our district has a history of censorship in such matters, I had our principal and assistant principal preview the film I intended to show to

the class. This serves an additional purpose: administration gets updated, too. When I announced my film as part of my oral report to the class (thus modeling for them my expectations), a male student recently voted "best beach body" by his fellow seniors protested, "What about the women?" voicing a stereotype we were about to dispel, that males are the perpetrators and females the victims. Not true.

"Oh, it shows women harassers, too," I reassured as the film began a discussion with role plays of on-the-job situations. Unfortunately, two of the males most likely to make sexual comments were absent. Students had lively discussion after the film, comparing experiences with current interpretations of standards set by federal law.

"I announced early and often to my students the topic of my search, my areas of question, and answers found."

The next day, when one of the now-present males began his usual patter, another male warned, "You should have been here yesterday. You'd know that was unacceptable." The film alone had a tremendous impact on student understanding of the issue and on their behavior. At least in my class, students quit using negative

references to each other's anatomy and sexual prowess.

Part of my research led to the friend of a friend, a Detroit area attorney specializing in labor law who made a classroom visit. As with the film, I asked for administrative preview. Before coming up to the classroom, John met as planned with the principals, to reassure them that he would use only appropriate technical terms, though when quoting individual harassers, the language would demonstrate inappropriate comments.

Walking into my room, John points to a hetero couple kissing good-bye in the hall. "That is an example right there," he says, explaining to me that anyone bothered by such behavior might sue, although no job-related coercion exists. My students are shocked at such a suggestion. Several admit that, on second thought, it makes them uncomfortable to see a couple kissing in the hall. It occurs to me that my students would not kiss in the classroom, no matter how passionate the relationship. They unconsciously draw classroom and hallway behavior lines. I mention my rule, "Keep hands, feet, and objects to yourself," which includes "no back rubs." They were shocked when I mentioned this at the beginning of the year. They think they're just "helping someone relax," but that someone is always of the opposite gender. Hetero back rubs they consider OK. They would be shocked to see a female rubbing a female, I explained, or a male soothing a male, because society tends to reject such behavior as inappropriately sexual, and overt sexual behavior is discouraged in the classroom.

John has recently won a \$6 million sexual harassment suit in Michigan Circuit Court, now on appeal (198 Mich. App. 183 Feb. 1993). Before explaining the suit, he gives some background on sexual harassment as a growing issue, perhaps not in frequency, but in recognition, complaint, and suit. He gives examples such as the couple in the hall and explains the "one feel" rule. Until a victim complains, it's not harassment. I think of criticisms of Anita Hill voiced in the teachers' lounge: "Why didn't she ever complain?" One complaint does not constitute harassment, but any complaint against the harasser after the first

does fall under the law. Thus, the harasser gets "one feel free."

John also explains the broad nature of the term sexual: any type of unwanted language or contact of a sexual nature. I think of students frequently calling each other, teachers, and administrators sexual epithets.

Then he explains his biggest case to date. A straight male at a large Michigan service company took a woman out but stopped dating her. She told co-workers he was gay. Gay co-workers asked him out: when they realized he was straight, but that their advances bothered him, the harassment began. The victim reported it to his superior and twice requested and received transfers, but co-workers called ahead, initiating harassment at each new job site. He became distraught, unable to work and paranoid about such every-day occurrences as a man in a pink shirt. His latest superior was found guilty of sexual harassment. The employer is appealing.

"Until a victim complains, it's not harassment."

Other companies are taking note. No one wants to pay premiums to cover \$6 million lawsuits. Workers are being trained and face firing if they can't comply with federal language. My high school seniors, most minimum wage workers themselves, ask questions until the bell.

After class, two heavy-set girls wait to ask, heads down, if "fat comments" constitute sexual harassment.

"Are they of a sexual nature?" John asks.

The girls explain, obviously embarrassed at having to state the epithets, that a group of students of both sexes call them "ugly fat bitches" and leave notes on their lockers: "fat ho," a student term for whore. John says yes, of course, these words are sexual in nature.

So, what should they do?

First, they must tell the students to stop in such a manner that no uncertainty exists that the attention is unwelcome. They should tell the harassers that they will be complaining to au-

thority, and that they will contact their attorney if it does not stop. Then they must complain to authority. In our school, that would be the vice principal in charge of discipline, I explain. He is obligated to spell out the law to the harassing students, John says.

A week later I notice the girls walking down the hall, heads up, laughing, more cheerful than I've seen them all year. They take me aside to tell me they did what John said, and the harassment stopped.

The same day, a slim girl with long thick curls takes me into a vacant room to confide in me: her forty-year-old manager has been telling sexual jokes in front of her. Two days ago he asked her if she was ticklish and threatened to find out. Yesterday, he grabbed her from behind and held her by the arms in front of the only other employee present, another male, and said, "You like it, don't you?" She says she felt scared, and she thinks it sounds like what John was talking about. Her boyfriend is threatening to beat up the manager. What should she do?

I have her write down for me names, times, and specific details and words. After consulting with her counselor, I call the owner of her business, quoting from the girl's written complaint. I explain that the girl is afraid and embarrassed to complain for herself. The owner will speak to the manager: "It won't happen again." Unfortunately, the girl quit her job two days later and did not pursue her claim.

Researching sexual harassment led me, like my students, to various sources. Like them, I began with magazine articles and texts. I had to make phone calls, schedule a speaker, preview a film, and meet with administrators. When questions arose, I had to find answers. Unexpectedly, real-life situations required action which helped me grow and develop as a person, a teacher, and a researcher. I realized my role as supervisor made it important for me, like those supervisors at the service company, to take steps to explain and follow federal law in my supervisory capacity.

This year, when Channel One (Whittle TV) ran several stories on sexual harassment, I used the series as an opportunity to explain to my freshmen and sophomores what each word of the term means. When I overheard a guy in the

back of the room teasingly ask a girl about the size of her "tits," I told her that the comment was sexual (as if she did not know), that she did not have to put up with it, and that I certainly would not. Neither would my assistant principal in charge of discipline nor the courts. In the past I would have overlooked the comment as regrettable but private, between the two of them, or had the harasser suspended. Now I know that it was more than inappropriate language. I could tell by the embarrassed angry look on her face. She'd heard it before, but suffered in silence. When I spoke, she smiled, and he looked uncomfortable.

Exposure relieved her discomfort, as it did that of the male student "beach body." He too, was relieved to publicly express his discomfort at unwanted female attention. He said that his comments were retaliatory rather than harassment. At any rate, frank discussion resulting from my search affected classroom behavior in a positive way and eliminated the need for further suspensions for fights caused by gender language.

Resources to Investigate

"Tune in to Your Rights: A Guide for Teenagers about Turning Off Sexual Harassment." (\$3 plus tax, Programs for Educational Opportunity Publications, 1005 School of Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. 48109)

Eleanor Linn, Associate Director, Programs for Educational Opportunity, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. 48109

Nan Stein, Ed.D. (first to identify and research peer harassment in high schools) Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA. 02181

Seventeen Magazine will supply a list of sources such as women's commissions or sex equity specialists in your area. 850 Third Avenue, New York, NY. 10022

Local businesses, especially school "Partners in Education." Their personnel departments or education departments may have persons available as speakers or resources you can use in the classroom.